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MIRABELLE OF PAMPELUNA

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BY

COLETTE YVER

TRANSLATED BY

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NEW YORK
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I

IT was scarcely eight o'clock in the morning, and Monsieur Henri, the clerk, was rearranging the set of Balzac, misplaced by a bibliophile the evening before, on the shelves of the book-shop, when the door-bell rang. An immense overcoat topped by a soft, very wide-brimmed hat rushed into the passage. Monsieur Henri was startled and said:

"Oh! Monsieur des Assernes!"

"I am he," said the strange person with the travelling-bag. "I came on the train from Toulouse. Is Monsieur Duval down-stairs yet? No? Nor Madame Duval either? Nor mademoiselle?"

"I will tell them that you have come, monsieur."

Monsieur Henri, the clerk, with his long white smock like those worn by druggist's apprentices, had an unassuming manner. Mon-

sieur Xavier des Assernes, the novelist from Toulouse, was quite different. Nevertheless, with his angular profile and his ample mustache remaining black as a crow's wing, by artificial means, in spite of his sixty years, he looked the fine, worthy man.

"It is unnecessary to disturb them, my good friend. I shall take my valise to the hotel and return in two hours. Only tell them to arrange to invite me to luncheon, for I am bringing some unpublished manuscript."

When Monsieur des Assernes had reached the sidewalk of the Rue du Cherche-Midi, which was touched by a warm beam of the morning sun, Monsieur Henri might have smiled. Any one else would have smiled at this big Don Quixote, walking along with great strides, on a June morning in Paris. But Monsieur Henri was already twenty-eight years old. Moreover, his humble duties in Monsieur Duval's shop combined with a nature devoid of all vanity to give this young man a modest idea of his own worth. He was able all the better to appreciate the talent and delightful enthusiasm of Monsieur des Assernes. The little book-clerk, handling rev-

erently from morning until night the material substance of that which composed the glorious literature of the country, was obliged to honor, in spite of his small eccentricities, the novelist who was the devoted interpreter of the *langue d'oc* literature of the Middle Ages, and revived so brilliantly the most poetic, vigorous, and charming epoch of France.

No. Monsieur Henri had no desire to ridicule the strange man he had just interviewed. He anticipated, rather, a great treat in the manuscript des Assernes was bringing. It was probably a discovery made in the archives of Toulouse, some chronicle of chivalry which he was bringing there first of all, and the clerk would gather up some of the crumbs while he was serving the customer. Monsieur Henri was an admirer of des Assernes. In addition, I have forgotten to tell you, he was in love, which does not tend to make one jocose or merry, especially if one is not exactly happy in his love. But just here a light step resounds on the staircase back of the shop. A young girl with freshly arranged hair, and rather melancholy black eyes, enters and seats herself at the cashier's desk. A delicate per-

fume is diffused through the shop. Monsieur Henri absent-mindedly puts an Anatole France among the Balzacs and remarks, without turning his head:

"Good morning, mademoiselle."

Mademoiselle Louise replies:

"Good morning, Monsieur Henri."

These two formulas appear absolutely the same on paper. Yet, on hearing them spoken, one would have felt the shy affection and the restrained emotion of Monsieur Henri, as well as the total indifference of Mademoiselle Louise.

When the row of Balzacs is rearranged in the order of the catalogue, or perhaps when the clerk's changed expression has resumed its deceptive calm, Monsieur Henri continues:

"Monsieur des Assernes arrived this morning. He will be here at ten o'clock; he hopes to be invited to luncheon."

It is Mademoiselle Louise this time who flushes scarlet. Her beautiful black eyes lose their languor and brighten.

"Monsieur des Assernes has come, truly? Oh, I must run quickly to let my parents know."

She leaves the desk; she runs; she is as joyous and excited as a young girl, in spite of her twenty-four years. Monsieur Henri remains alone in the shop. He looks pensively through the glass door. The Rue du Cherche-Midi is crowded and noisy. The sweeper's wagon passes with its bells; carts, returning from the markets, are driven between the milk wagons. Fast autos take the right of way ahead of the heavy vehicles which let them pass, and in the midst of the turmoil the street hawkers, moving along with their hand carts, cry out asparagus and strawberries for sale, a sign of summer.

When Monsieur Henri went to work with Monsieur Duval he was fifteen years old and Louise was eleven. She was already pretty, and he realized it. At that time he was very anxious to continue his studies at the public schools, but his mother, widow of a small official, needed his financial assistance at once, and he had never complained because he had been obliged to take a position before completing his classical studies like the others. Now, he was almost like a member of the Duval family. He would have liked to be-

long to it wholly. Scarcely any hope was left to him to-day. Meanwhile, it was something to live in the shadow of Mademoiselle Louise, to sleep under the same roof, to break bread with her at the table, to breathe the subtile perfume she shed about her in the shop, cruel and torturing joys which would end on the day when some Prince Charming, brilliant and magnificent, would come to deprive him of everything.

II

HALF-PAST TEN. Des Assernes is seated in a recess in the shop made by the projection of the quarters of the concierge into a corner of the room; the Duval family surround him. The light is very dim; an electric lamp gives an impression of twilight. Monsieur Duval, the bookseller, appears, short and thin. His thoughtful eyes gaze eagerly at the visitor. Monsieur Duval is a passionate lover of literature. He is the novelist's best friend, his devoted and keen listener. But the sentimental and enthusiastic bachelor, des Assernes, is especially proud to believe that he has influenced the ardent mind of the charming Louise with his talks, carrying her glowing imagination along with him into the wonderful dream of the past. The excellent Madame Duval also listens to des Assernes. I shall not tell you anything more of her; you must think of her as a woman who is more of a housekeeper than a poet, listening

with one ear to the novelist's tales, while she is in reality occupied with the roast and entrées to be served to him during the meal.

Meanwhile three students from the Buffon College have come into the shop. Monsieur Henri shows them various editions of the classics to choose from. The hesitating youths turn over the leaves and timidly look at each other for advice. Monsieur Henri often has an opportunity to glance toward the darker end of the store where the noble face of des Assernes, with his strong profile like Don Quixote, is lighted by an electric gleam, while, in the semi-darkness, the delightful face of Mademoiselle Louise, with half-opened lips, looks like a portrait in a museum.

"When they were tearing down the wall of the sacristy," relates des Assernes, "the abbé of the convent of Saint-Seurin discovered this chest full of loose papers, ancient manuscripts, partially obliterated by time and misplaced by ignorant hands. The good father sent for me and said: 'Monsieur, this is for you.' My dear Duval, I went down on my knees before the chest, a record of a century of chivalry and of beauty. And when I saw the agitating

date of 1268, the wonderful year when Saint Louis, the king, determined to go on the most extraordinary, unexpected, useless, and disinterested of all the crusades, the tears literally ran down my cheeks. Imagine my delight when, after six weeks of research and study, I realized that I had in my hand, mixed with subsequent monastery records, an extraordinary and magnificent *langue d'oc* romance, the story of the beautiful Mirabelle of Pampeluna!"

"Mirabelle of Pampeluna!" repeats Mademoiselle Louise, her hands crossed in a kind of ecstasy.

Somewhat embarrassed to disturb this lofty discourse, Monsieur Henri comes forward in his clerk's blouse and announces in a dull voice:

"Two francs seventy-five to be taken in!"

The expression of Mademoiselle Louise's eyes is indescribable. She rises regretfully; she surveys from head to foot the clerk who represents the petty interests, all the mediocrity of the small trade which is consuming her life. She goes to the cashier's desk; a student's red hand puts down a five-franc piece;

she returns the change, thinking of Pampeluna. Pampeluna, Roncesvalles, Roland, Charlemagne; then Mirabelle in a silver corselet, with her head wrapped in a white-silk cloth. . . .

"She was," continues des Assernes after Mademoiselle Louise has returned and seated herself near him, "the daughter of a very rich lord of Navarre, named Gascon Sanse. She was endowed with a thousand glorious talents. The anonymous chronicler who tells the history says that 'she sang the most beautiful, delectable, and melodious songs ever heard from voice or viol.' All Pampeluna was inclined to imagine itself in love with such a perfect and learned lady," he added. "How the young lord Mainfroy of Catalpan became her knight has escaped me. The leaves are missing here, but may be found among the farm accounts of the monks which I was not able to recover. But I imagine that it was with this pure and moving voice that the young noble, nephew of the count of Foix, was so greatly charmed. He had, it seems, on his coat of arms, a lion's head, and his blood was so fiery and valiant that when he

was sixteen, not yet a knight, he held alone, with five hundred men at arms, his uncle's castle besieged by the king's troops."

"At sixteen years!" exclaims Mademoiselle Louise with astonishment.

"All that he did afterward," responds des Assernes, "is even more wonderful, if I may judge by subsequent pages where my curious eyes have wandered in spite of myself. But the greatest marvel of all was the sweet love which this invincible warrior, recalling in more ways than one Roland the knight-errant, had for his lady, the lovely Mirabelle; it is difficult to know which to admire most, the gallantry or the tenderness of his affection. The day before he was to depart for the crusade he remained from morning until night seated on the ground, among the flowers, listening to the beautiful singer of moving ballads!"

These are the things Monsieur Henri is obliged to overhear with an indifferent air, under the watchful eyes of a client who is unable to make a choice among the latest literary novelties of the bookstore. This client is a pretty woman, apparently capricious, who asks the clerk absurd questions, such as: "Tell

me which is the most amusing of these three novels," or even: "Why doesn't the author ever have more than two hundred and seventy pages in his books?" You may be sure that Monsieur Henri, rather than reply to these useless remarks, would have infinitely preferred to go and sit by Mademoiselle Louise to hear with her the touching story of Mirabelle and of Mainfroy. But he has no right to desert the salesroom. His duty is mediocre, but it is his duty. All the time Mademoiselle Louise is thinking of the noble knight who loved Mirabelle and was so courageous that nothing less than a lion's head on his coat of arms was worthy to signify his bravery.

"What a wonderful time," she says to herself with a sigh, "when women were loved by such men!"

"But," asks Monsieur Duval thoughtfully, "can you tell me, my dear master, if this Mirabelle of Pampeluna ever really lived, and if these manuscripts so full of wealth for you are certainly the work of a faithful chronicler?"

"I should be inclined to believe, my dear Duval," replied des Assernes, "that my au-

thor was, rather, a simple troubadour, who invented a fine story of chivalry, for I have already noticed some anachronisms in his text. And I almost prefer it to be so, I assure you, for, in regard to approximate correctness of dates and events, an imaginative story-teller is a truer mirror of his time than the most scrupulous, but dry and colorless historian." With these words Xavier des Assernes unrolls a manuscript whose theme is drawn from the old parchment of the convent of Saint-Seurin. It is the romance of Mirabelle, written as fast as he made his discoveries. He prepares to read it. But Madame Duval gives them to understand that luncheon will soon be ready, and that it would be better to eat it before it is spoiled.

"You must read it to us for dessert, Monsieur des Assernes."

III

MADAME DUVAL had a sister called Madame Bouchaud, living at Choisy-le-Roi. If you ask me why this lady did not live in Paris, like Madame Duval, I shall tell you that she was married to Monsieur Bouchaud, head of a department in the great store *Meilleur Marché*, who lived solely for the joy of fishing with a rod and line. Their eighteen-year-old son, Georges, studying to be a chemist, adored boating, and their daughter, Edith, two years older, begged for country air. They had, therefore, bought as a compromise a small cottage built of round stones, with a red-tiled roof. Its architecture was so complicated that the house had twelve corners caused by projections and recesses. But its great charm was its proximity to the Seine, where every Sunday the family Bouchaud and the family Duval, with Monsieur Henri and a salesman from the glove department, a subordinate of Father Bouchaud,

called Robert Picot, had a reunion and abandoned themselves to a joyous holiday.

It is Sunday. As usual Monsieur and Madame Duval and their daughter, all three escorted by Monsieur Henri, take the eleven o'clock train at the Saint-Michel station. The auto-bus, in defiance, passes by, under their eyes, to the terminus; they are reduced to going on foot by the Rue de Rennes. Madame Duval, afflicted with a certain amount of embonpoint, and annoyed by tight shoes, finds it difficult to hurry. Monsieur Duval, dry and nervous, keeps repeating that they will miss the Choisy train. Monsieur Henri, in a spirit of conciliation, tries to distract his attention by speaking of the carp weighing one kilo and three hundred and thirty grammes, caught on the previous Sunday by Robert Picot.

"Yes, it was that carp," replies Monsieur Duval crossly, "that broke my line ten minutes before, I am certain."

Mademoiselle Louise walks gloomily by her mother's side. She apparently ignores Monsieur Henri. But I must tell you a curious thing: Mademoiselle Louise is much more oc-

cupied with Monsieur Henri than appears. Only she thinks with regret that he is just this type of man: Here is a young man who has achieved nothing beyond pulling carp or gudgeons out of the water, and who is contented! She says to herself somewhat scornfully:

"If one ever arranged a coat of arms for him, he would not be honored with a lion's head; and for all his hatchments, he would be satisfied with a fish-hook!"

Now they arrive at Saint-Germain-des-Prés. Mademoiselle Louise lifts her eyes to the ancient tower containing the belfry with the slate cap. The aspect of these ancient stones, recalling the past, consoles her for the electric train, the autos, and the common Sunday crowd walking along the sidewalks past the closed shop windows.

At last here is the boulevard, and here is the Saint-Michel station. There is a crush at the ticket window. People are sucked down into the subway below. Very gently the electric trains arrive. The Duval family finds room in the second class. Four young men are already in the compartment. The nature of their baggage indicates clearly enough that

the expedition on which they are bound is not for the purpose of attacking anything more than the peaceful inhabitants of the water, for they carry bundles of lines and hand-nets tied together. They chat about their recent fishing excursions and evidently try to astonish each other by exaggerating the fish stories of which they are the heroes. After leaving Paris they cross the country market-gardens. Fresh, tender green lettuces lie in straight lines in the hollows of innumerable furrows and turn in perspective as the train moves. Enlarged cabbages, grown in rich soil, seem to call for monstrous cooking utensils. The asparagus is already showing itself, with its delicate foliage like green mist.

"Would you like to live in the country?" Monsieur Henri asks of Mademoiselle Louise. Madame Duval is drowsy. Monsieur Duval, in fishing costume, has turned toward the young travellers and joined in their conversation. Henri and Louise are thus quite tête-à-tête, as if they were alone.

"That depends," replies Louise, with a superior air. "I should not like a market-garden country."

Monsieur Henri knows very well, as he

knows his Louise perfectly, that she would prefer a mountain with pine woods, torrents, and precipices. But he says, looking straight into the black eyes that will not love him:

"Nature is always nature. We cannot demand too much of life. We can beautify whatever is not so grand as we could wish. We can beautify it as we desire, by adding the light we possess in ourselves. I sometimes imagine a garden, made of squares of cabbage and carrots, with a little house built in the back; and that might be so beautiful, so beautiful!"

Monsieur is very much moved; his lips tremble and his heart beats wildly. But Mademoiselle Louise is unfair. She feels that this fisherman does not appear well as a philosopher and she smiles as she turns her head.

Besides, here is Choisy-le-Roi. As on every other Sunday, Madame Bouchaud and her daughter Edith are on the platform and wave their red umbrellas when they see the Duvals. Then follow kisses and squeezing of hands, and then questions:

"And Abel? And Georges?"

"They are on the water with Robert Picot.

They are fishing. We will go quickly to get them."

Madame Bouchaud happens to be Madame Duval's twin sister and that saves me the trouble of describing her to you. But Mademoiselle Edith does not resemble her cousin Louise in any way. She is tall and blonde. She has a rather fragile air and tries to appear English, in harmony with her name.

Choisy-le-Roi is very noisy. The Parisians have continued to flock there since morning. The café terraces overflow. Wine bottles accumulate on the little restaurant tables. The families greedily divide their chickens. Some phonographs are heard playing languidly "On the Shores of the Riviera." Anglers pass, armed with lines; the silver fish jump in the nets.

"My dear," says Louise, taking Edith's arm and hurrying her on ahead, "can't you guess?"

Good! Exactly here father and son Bouchaud emerge from the quay with Robert Picot. Their only tales are of poor luck. I assure you that Father Bouchaud, weighing one hundred and nineteen kilos, does not suffer

from cold. His collar chokes him. He mops his brow, and is obliged to unbutton his coat. He is a decided contrast to his salesman, the young Monsieur Robert, who is sallow, has dark circles around his eyes, and is slender. Being the youngest, Georges Bouchaud carries the net full of gudgeons.

After further hearty greetings, it is Edith's turn to take Louise's arm in leaving the group:

"Do you know, my dear, Monsieur Robert has asked for my hand from papa this week."

"That," replies Louise, "I have seen coming. And what did you respond?"

"Ah! I was very much embarrassed, you understand. I cannot say that I dislike him, for I do not. I find him very nice. But it is so ordinary to marry a salesman! I should have liked to love a young man who had done something noble, a husband of whom I should have been proud—an aviator, for example."

"That is like me. But what can you expect? In the sad times we live in there is no more heroism. Men care only for trifles. Their ideal is to bring back a bigger fish story than any of their friends, or to play *manille* as

an appetizer. Beyond that, there is nothing for them."

"France is certainly decadent," says Edith.

"Yes, indeed she is!" says Louise. But they have reached the Bouchauds' house. While Edith cuts a rose in the garden for her cousin, Mamma Bouchaud calls until she is hoarse on the outside steps:

"Come to the table! The mutton will be burned."

There is a melon—the first of the season—over which they all exclaim; haricot of mutton, the national dish of the bourgeois French, and a turbot not found in the Seine. Father Bouchaud shakes with laughter as he shows the salad bowl of strawberries, and says that since five o'clock in the morning he has been bent over in the vegetable garden, picking one by one the endless little "torments," and that his wife inflicts this punishment upon him to make him thin. Father Bouchaud is liveliness personified. He has a thousand anecdotes to relate about the clients of the *Meilleur Marché;* of the woman with big hands who is absolutely determined to wear six and a half gloves; of the one with bony hands who al-

ways splits the glove she tries on, and of the one who wants to return the evening gloves she has worn during an entire ball. They listen and he amuses them. Monsieur Henri is placed by Louise's side, and Monsieur Robert next to Edith. Monsieur Duval wants to recount in his turn the visit of des Assernes, who came yesterday from Toulouse. But suddenly his exuberant brother-in-law interrupts him:

"And this blessed Georges, you know he is to pass his first examination a month from now! If he keeps on, the fellow will be a chemist at twenty-five."

"Unhappily," adds Georges, correcting his statement, "the three years' law has since passed to interfere with our plans, papa. You never think of that."

"Ah! the three years' law, it is true that I can never beat that idea into my head. And I ask you of what use . . ."

"To grow musty for three years in barracks," continues Georges.

Mademoiselle Louise watches her young cousin with disapproval.

"What would you have done if you had

lived in the time of the crusades?" she asks in a crushing tone.

Then the older sister adds to complete the rebuke: "Have you no pride in thinking that you are going to defend your country during the three years?"

"Oh, my country is hardly menaced," says Georges, with assurance.

"The head of the silk department," timidly remarks the silent Robert Picot, reddening, "said the other day that there will be war next spring."

"What do you think of that!" exclaims Georges.

"He is an imbecile," declares Monsieur Bouchaud.

IV

UNDER a pale-blue cloudless sky the Seine moves with quiet flow, bordered with the fresh green country of the Parisian suburbs, where the poplars quiver. The tac-tac of a powerful gasolene motor breaks the silence; a swiftly rushing stem cleaves the waters: it is the Bouchaud's motor yawl passing by. Georges is at the helm. The two young women with their heads wrapped in white veils, floating to the wind, are longing to exchange further confidences. But it would be necessary to shout them in a loud voice to overcome the noise of the motor. They feel behind them, shy and melancholy, the gaze of the two clerks, and are anxious for fear they may be overheard.

Heaven be praised, before arriving at the Ablon mill-dam, the fishermen conceive the idea of anchoring by a grassy, verdant island. They proceed at once to regulate the engine. The motor is quiet, the boat is headed straight.

Louise and Edith go to sit at the back. Louise, at last, is able to pour out her heart.

"Do you know, my dear, Monsieur des Assernes arrived yesterday from Toulouse. He came straight to us to read us something extraordinary, marvellous, and fascinating: it is a romance of chivalry which he found on some old parchments, the history of Mirabelle of Pampeluna."

"You were in great luck!" sighs Edith.

Louise continues, lifting her head with pride:

"Count Mainfroy of Catalpan, nephew of the count of Foix, was madly in love with Mirabelle, but he was the most warlike knight of his time. Monsieur des Assernes read to us yesterday, at dessert, what he had begun to write about this knight who went on a crusade. Ah, my dear, but he was marvellous!"

"Monsieur des Assernes?" queries Edith.

"Oh, no, Mainfroy of Catalpan!"

"In the name of all the saints," cries Monsieur Bouchaud, "my line is broken again. I wager it was a four-pound pike!"

"Do be quiet, Monsieur Bouchaud," begs Robert Picot, in a muffled voice.

With the reflections of the dark foliage the stream looks like black ink. A delicious freshness prevails. On the highest branch of a silver poplar a blackbird sings with notes of crystal purity. Our two mammas are dozing. Louise continues:

"When he had decided to take the cross and follow the king beyond the sea, as the story goes, he went, before his departure, to spend a week at the château of Pampeluna, so that he might gaze with all his eyes on the lady of his thoughts whom he was leaving forever. And it was there that they had wonderful conversations on honor, chivalry, and love. The beautiful Mirabelle demanded, to test him: 'Sweet lover, which do you love best, honor or your lady?' To which the knight replied: 'I love my lady above everything, including honor.' 'Then,' said Mirabelle, 'if you love your lady so much that you prefer her to everything, including honor, why are you willing to make her suffer by leaving her, to fight the Saracens?' 'If I love my lady sincerely,' answered Mainfroy, 'I would rather have her grieve for my death than for my dishonor. Consequently, if for the false love of

her I should refuse to obey the call of God and the king, I should sin more grievously against my lady than in forsaking her in her château.' Then Mirabelle cried: 'A good response, Sir Knight. Nevertheless, I should not like to see you fail.' And to requite him Mirabelle sang to Mainfroy a beautiful melody, with one of the nuns to accompany her on the viol. However, when the count of Catalpan was obliged to depart, Mirabelle shed so many tears that all of her attendants fled, unable to bear the sight of so much grief. And she climbed to the tower of the château of Pampeluna, which was very high. The knight was already in armor. She watched the rider and his suite for a long time as they crossed the mountain. When he had disappeared, she shut herself in her room, where for a long time she did not wish to eat or drink. As for the count Mainfroy, he urged his steed and wearied all of his suite on the road, in his ardent longing to kill the infidels."

"How I should have liked to live in such an age!" says Edith.

Without adding anything, Louise heaves a long sigh. Then the two young girls turn

toward their two commonplace lovers. The latter are crouched down, peaceful and good-natured, on the edge of the boat, with bent backs and the fishing-pole in their doubled fists. From time to time one of them pulls out a silver gudgeon, which flaps about on the end of the line.

"What an exquisitely beautiful day!" murmurs Father Bouchaud, thus expressing the contentment and the quiet bliss of every one.

"The young men of to-day make fun of adventures," says Louise disapprovingly.

Monsieur Duval, who does not fish, reads *Le Temps* of the evening before and interrupts to read aloud:

"Well, well! It seems that the president of the republic is going to Russia. I ask you . . ."

"Do be quiet," demands his brother-in-law imperiously; "you will frighten the fish."

V

ON Sunday evening a clamorous multitude invades the railway station of Choisy-le-Roi. In the dimly lighted waiting-room children sleep on the benches. Young girls carry armfuls of wild flowers, already half faded. Young people of a pleasure party, very much excited by the wine served to them at dinner in the little restaurant, sing the Riviera waltz; the garlands of harmony ornamenting all of its melodies have accompanied them throughout this exhilarating day. Successful fishermen protect as best they can the booty they are carrying back to Paris.

The family Bouchaud has come to attend the Duval family, until it is absorbed in the tumult. While waiting for the train Robert Picot hovers around Edith, with whom, during the entire day, he has not been able to exchange a word in private. By good fortune

a movement of the crowd detaches her from her group of relatives. She finds herself alone, facing Monsieur Robert. This noisy station is perhaps not a favorable place for the outpouring of affections. In novels, for similar scenes, they choose the most poetic spots, where it is possible to have a touch of mystery. But in real life one takes things as they come. Robert Picot is, moreover, very happy to be able to exchange a few words with Mademoiselle Edith, even in the hubbub of this waiting-room.

"Your father has told you that we have talked together about you, mademoiselle?" he murmurs, a little nervous.

"Oh, yes," replies Edith, rather troubled. "You are . . . you are very good to think of me. You understand that I was very much surprised. I cannot answer you yet."

"Do I displease you?" suggests the young man, his teeth clenched, but with an expression of indifference.

"I do not say that . . . only I must consider."

At this moment a large woman pushes against them, as she tries to go out. After a

silence Monsieur Robert continues, as he searches through his pocketbook: "I should like to give you something. Here are some verses."

"Oh!" says Edith, blushing, "you have composed some verses for me!"

Immediately she begins to estimate whether, lacking an aviator, it would not be just as stylish to marry a poet. But Monsieur Robert, with a wan smile, replies:

"No, no; they are not mine. I have only copied them for you. They are by Sully Prudhomme. That is much better than by Robert Picot."

"Ah!" says Edith, disenchanted. And she reaches out her hand to take the paper.

"I copied them with emotion," stammers Robert Picot, looking at Edith.

Edith turns somewhat pale under this strange look. She would like to thank Robert and tell him that she would read the verses when she reaches home in the evening, but the train arrives. The glass doors are opened and the crowd rushes out on the wharf. The family Bouchaud is pushed along behind the family Duval as far as the car steps. Through-

out the length of the train the same cry re-echoes:

"Good-by! Thank you. Until next Sunday!"

The train has already disappeared into the night as Madame Bouchaud, remaining in front of the station with her family, still waves her handkerchief tragically.

As there was no room in the second-class compartments, the Duvals are established in the first-class, where they find themselves alone, by a happy chance. The softness of the seats and the ease of the springs, as well as the fatigue of a day in the open air, have quickly lulled the parents to sleep. Here they are dozing before they have reached the next station. But the same causes do not produce the same effect upon clerks as upon employers. I assure you that Monsieur Henri has not the slightest desire to sleep. Louise, a little weary, is charming this evening. Her lovely eyes have a velvety quality, very sweet to watch, but also a depth that makes one giddy. On his part, Monsieur Henri has lost the modest air he wears in the shop of the Cherche-Midi. It is quite another thing from han-

dling, from morning until night, in a dark store, the pale yellow covers of books at three francs fifty, quite different to sail on a silver stream, under a torrid sun, while the birds split their throats in the trees of the river banks. The intoxication of nature makes one long for happiness.

Mademoiselle Louise has the prettiest hand in the world, with a delicate wrist showing beyond a lace cuff. This hand hypnotizes Monsieur Henri, who all at once ventures to take it and press it very hard.

"I love you, Louise," he murmurs. She is not exactly annoyed. She doesn't withdraw her hand. . . . But she thinks of the knight of Catalpan and she questions:

"If I should ask you to throw yourself for me from the top of the Eiffel Tower, what would you do?"

Amazed, the young man stares blankly at her. His good sense is completely upset; then he replies quickly:

"If you should ask that," he says coldly, "it would be because you were extremely malicious; then I should cease to love you, and I should not do it."

He stops pressing Louise's hand. He has received a shock of cold water. But, as a tender heart is always afraid of having hurt the object of its admiration, he continues after an instant: "If it were necessary to save you, I should do it, Mademoiselle Louise."

VI

THE month of September has arrived, and with it Xavier des Assernes, who has crossed, on the journey to Paris, a France golden with grain and the sun. But to-day the enthusiastic author, seated in the shop in the Rue du Cherche-Midi between M. Duval and Mademoiselle Louise, leaves the manuscript of the lovely Mirabelle untouched on his knees. A profound silence hovers around the shelves of books. Do not look here any more for M. Henri's white smock. It is exactly one month to-day since he was drafted. He went August 2 with his friend, Robert Picot, and no one since then has received any word from them. It is reported that the Germans are three days' march from Paris. Suddenly the sound of the door-bell breaks the silence of the shop. The door opens with a bang. M. Bouchaud enters in a gust of wind. He pulls out his handkerchief and mops his forehead under his straw hat as he exclaims:

"You haven't heard it? The government is leaving."

Then he drops into a chair.

Slightly more reserved and a little paler than usual, M. Duval questions him:

"Where is it going? To Versailles?"

"To Toulouse?" asks des Assernes.

"Oh! I don't know myself!" replies the department manager humorously. "They are running away to put the musty old papers of France where they are safe. That is all."

"When I arrived last evening at Orsay," says des Assernes, "I was obliged to push through a crowd of people sitting even on the floor of the station while they waited for the uncertain departure of the train which was to take them away. The sight was both distressing and picturesque."

"Is it then true that the enemy is approaching?" queries Louise.

Louise has her usual air. Her customary gravity is in harmony with the present hour.

"So they say," replies Uncle Bouchaud, "but before I believe that Paris is taken, I must see fifty thousand pointed helmets in the Place de la Concorde. And even when I shall

have seen them I shall say to myself: 'Abel, your eyes are deceiving you.' "

"Bravo, monsieur!" cheers des Assernes. "That is a remark worthy of becoming historic."

"I did not say it for that," replies Father Bouchaud, quite astonished.

"It seems that they hear the cannon in the Saint Denis district," remarks M. Duval.

"What are you going to do?" asks the novelist. "Where are you going to find a safe place?"

"I, find a safe place?" cries Father Bouchaud, rolling his eyes furiously.

"We, find a safe place?" exclaims M. Duval at the same time.

"My dear sir," replies the department manager, holding up his head, "it was thirty-seven years ago the 28th of last July since I went to the *Meilleur Marché*. I began there as a small salesman. I was promoted then from position to position, and I have earned there the few pennies I possess. It is the establishment that has made me what I am. When I speak of it I say the 'house,' in the same way I refer to my home. Very well, monsieur, to-

day when two-thirds of the staff, called by the mobilization, are away and when the 'house' is working under difficulties, I consider it my duty to remain at my post, like a soldier; yes, monsieur, like an obedient soldier."

The blood has mounted to his face, making red blotches on his smooth-shaven cheeks and swelling the veins of his neck. With a motion he unfastens his collar-button, and then, relieved and comfortable, he continues:

"I begged Madame Bouchaud and the little one to remain alone at Choisy. For, monsieur, you understand that in future we cannot count on regular suburban train service. I cannot go there any more to sleep. Well, monsieur, those two creatures who, bless my soul, after all are nothing but women, do you know what they replied to me? Madame Bouchaud said to me: 'Do you think that we shall remain here while you are in Paris in great danger? No, no; we shall go and take a lodging, a shelter, no matter what, and we shall die together.' And my daughter Edith added: 'Even if the Germans should enter Paris I should not be afraid.'"

He is calmer now, but his eyes are wet, and

a furtive tear slides toward his mustache. With altered voice he adds:

"But best of all, monsieur, the crowning touch of the story is that the little one, Georges, my son, eighteen years old, has said to me from morning until night, for three weeks: 'I want to enlist. I must enlist.' Say what you will, a father who has only one youngster of that age shudders to think of his being under fire. I was angry. I swore and cursed, and I declared that I should never give my consent. Confound it! France isn't desperate enough for soldiers to make it necessary for eighteen-year-old youngsters to die in her defense. But patriotism is a curious thing, monsieur. The other evening I heard a strange noise coming from Georges' room. His mother said to me: 'He is ill; they say he is groaning.' I ran to him. The boy was crying, hidden under his sheet. And he complained: 'When I think that they are in France, that they are marching toward us, and that I haven't even a gun to shoot at them!' He didn't say any more, monsieur, but I had not realized, before, the meaning of the invasion, and at that moment I understood it. And I

blurted out the decisive sentence: 'Georges, I give you my consent.' Now it is done. There is nothing left for him but to go to sign his papers at the town hall of Choisy."

Xavier des Assernes listens with admiration to the honest bourgeois, M. Bouchaud, as he expresses so simply the finest feelings of his race.

Louise murmurs, with a touch of emotion: "Georges is splendid; you, too, uncle."

More accustomed to the analysis of his experiences and feelings, the bookseller speaks in his turn.

"I shall not leave my book-shop," he asserts. "It would bring me more honor, perhaps, if it did not seem best to me that I should remain here to defend the products of the French mind, of which I am the humble guardian, against the plundering of these barbarians. But I could not endure it if in my absence they should enter here and defile or steal my collections. I have some very fine Villons. It is merchandise that is not for the nose of these villains. I know that as for my Rabelais, which will make Monsieur des Assernes turn yellow with envy, I should take it

with me. But my bargain Ronsards, my cheap Voltaires, and even my editions of modern authors at ninety-five centimes, I should be enraged to see them become the prey of these savages. No, no, I remain. I have a good revolver and I shall defend my shop. Besides, I hope, like Bouchaud, that the pointed helmets will not come as far as this, and that we shall soon see the end of this cataclysm. In which case it is important that commercial life should be continued and that we, the civilians, who do not pour out our blood, uphold the usual course of regular living, without disturbing ourselves. Only I should like to arrange that my wife and daughter should go away."

Then Louise straightens herself up, and adds simply: "Ask Mirabelle of Pampeluna if she would have fled before the enemy."

VII

THE road on the ridge of the hill is as white as chalk; it is dazzling in the brilliant sunlight. With a rumble and clatter the passage of forty thousand army shoes reverberates in cadence; the red trousers are flaming in the light. But in the distance the troops are enveloped in a thick rolling cloud, which is simply the dust they have raised. To the right and left the ripe oats, ready to be harvested, wave and bend back their full ears. From time to time a marching song pours forth from the throat of a corporal wishing to hurry his squad along. It is "*Les godillots sont lourds dans l'sac,*" or "*Y a la goutte à boire là-haut.*" But the men grumble:

"He thinks, then, that we are not thirsty enough already, the bull-head?"

And the song dies unechoed in the dull thud of heavy tramping. Suddenly, in the rear, a muffled, indistinct explosion is heard resounding and repeating itself.

"Do you think that firecracker hit Rheims?"

"There is no doubt of it, old fellow; they ought to be able to see the cathedral."

"When we left the city this morning they were not yet firing on it."

"The wretched beasts! Fortunately, we are waiting for them around the corner."

Perhaps you have not recognized, under their dusty caps and their coal-black skin, through which their wild eyes shine, the two troopers exchanging opinions, in the fourth squad of the first section of the eighth company, as they cover the kilometers—they are on the thirtieth for this morning—on the dusty roads. Well, they are M. Henri and M. Robert, the book-clerk and the glove-seller. A kind fortune has thrown them both in the same regiment and in the same 8th, which at Charleroi, ten days earlier, held out for two hours with muskets alone against two German machine-guns. You may well believe that the 8th did not come out of it intact. Far from it. M. Henri, with torn and riddled coat, was hit, and M. Robert has a scratch on his neck. After

which they were detached and placed in the same squad. And here they are.

"Do you know, Picot, they said there was a village down below."

"Excellent! We shall have a drink."

M. Henri is not mistaken. It is the village of La Chapelle. And a command passes along the line, producing a loud sigh of relief among these worn-out troops, rising from the very heart of these twenty thousand men, the contented sigh of the exhausted animal finally able to rest; they are to camp in this village!

There is quick confusion. The red trousers scatter like a flood glistening in the meadows and fields. The men stretch their tired legs with ecstasy in the soft comfort of the ripe oats. The inhabitants emerge from the farms. The same cry resounds everywhere—"Wine!"

But here on the road is a moving cloud advancing, accompanied by the sound of galloping, of army trucks and of clanking iron. It is a detachment of heavy artillery, ten batteries which will leave their ammunition wagons drawn up in line on the principle street of the village, while drivers, gunners, and artillery-men creep into the streets and lanes,

anywhere that a farmhouse or a cottage is to be found, to repeat again the same cry: "Wine!"

Night is closing in. The evening is suffocating. Picot and Lecointre set up a fine kettle in a stack of newly cut wheat by the side of a little hill. The eyes of the twenty thousand harassed men close under a sky black with storm. They have satisfied the most terrible of all needs, thirst, and from the stables and the cattle-sheds, where the most knowing are lodged, the groves, the haystacks, and the fields surrounding the village, rises the snoring of the sleeping troops.

Picot and Lecointre are not sleepy. They are asking themselves the meaning of this retreat. They do not understand it.

"If I knew that it was a rout," asserts Henri Lecointre, who is easily depressed, I should have preferred to have stayed at Charleroi with my comrades."

"A rout! But, old fellow," explains Robert Picot, "don't you realize that, on the contrary, we are executing a manœuvre? They are taking us to some place, I don't know just where. But let the Boches beware!"

"Do you remember," remarks Henri Le-

cointre mournfully, "that beautiful Sunday at Choisy, when we fished all the afternoon, anchored by the island?"

"Ah!" replies Robert Picot. "How can you ask if I remember?"

A clap of thunder, this time a genuine one, closes their lips. At the same time the pattering of the rain and hail on the straw of their shelter compels them to bury themselves deeper in the warm hut. Soon they are overpowered by fatigue, in spite of the din of the storm. They are off to a land more beautiful than the terrible reality. . . .

At daybreak, on the muddy road, hardly lighted by the dawn, three soldiers on cycles are seen, pedalling frantically. Sweat makes ridges on their dusty faces. When they reach the little town they rouse every man they can find to inquire where the colonel is staying. This is the news they stammer out: the enemy is four kilometers away. He is advancing rapidly.

Then while three colonels confer with the commander of artillery in the assembly-room of the town hall, in the sharp air of the early morning, the notes of the reveille sound over

the encampments, sent by the bugles to the four winds, causing twenty thousand men to rise up at one stroke, as if they were springing up out of the ground. No wine. Nothing. No liquor. Marching order, four abreast and quickly! Only the captain of the 8th says to his men: "We shall remain here to defend the movement of the troops."

For the entire length of the village, in the main road bordered with hedges, one by one the heavy field-pieces of the ten batteries of "155's" are lined up. But the horses are grazing in the fields, and not an ammunition wagon is ready yet. Meanwhile a strange order is given. There is a revolution in the village. The women, in loose jackets and night-caps, come out of their homes. There are sobs and tears. Already the men go to the stables to let out the animals, cows and pigs, and drive them toward the country and neighboring woods. For it is necessary that the whole village should be evacuated in a quarter of an hour.

"What is going to happen?" asks Henri Lecointre, contemplating the lamentable exodus of all these poor people, fleeing in the direc-

tion of Champvoisy, carrying, tied in white towels, the most precious of their possessions.

"They may fight here, perhaps," says Robert Picot.

"It may be so!" says the book-clerk, trembling.

But no, it is not yet time to fight. The truth is that three hundred meters from here the plateau descends by an abrupt road toward the valley; that the rain-storm has transformed the road into a mire; that the heavy ammunition wagons, travelling in its ruts, are in danger of remaining there, and that the Germans are on the heels of the French troops. In that case, rather than abandon to the enemies these fierce and terrible cannon, that have never failed us, would it not be better to destroy them here, to break them in pieces so that when the village is reached the enemy will not find anything beyond the enormous holes where their noble remains are buried?

Robert Picot and Henri Lecointre realize the truth when they see the major approaching, gaze with a long look at the motionless and unsuspecting cannon, and then turn to conceal his emotion from his astounded officers.

In the country, on the highways, in the trampled oats are women and children, dragging the pigs, driving the cows, fleeing and crying; the village is empty now and appears dead; the gunners, mounting their horses as they spur them on, hurry toward the main road. A dozen artillerymen remain with two non-commissioned officers and the major. On the road the men of the 8th are busy digging small trenches at every turn, where can be concealed, on their knees, thanks to the bundles of fagots, stations of watchers to await the arrival of the gray coats. The fourth squad stays behind the longest; Robert Picot and Henri Lecointre, with fingers on the trigger of their guns, their red trousers on the damp earth, are on guard. Suddenly they start. A conflagration in successive bursts illumines even the light of day, and their eyes are still dimmed by the dazzling brightness as their ear-drums are rent with the most infernal noise that human ears are able to endure. Fifty cannon explode at the same moment, and apple-trees laden with apples are blown into the air, and all of Champagne trembles. . . .

Robert Picot has thrown down his gun with

an angry gesture and, taking his head between his hands, hides his face in the fagots protecting the trenches.

"Bundle of nerves," says his friend to him. "What is the matter? Is it the noise?"

But after waiting an instant Picot returns to Lecointre and uncovers his tear-stained face. He can only say one thing:

"It is miserable! It is wretched! The fine cannon we need so much!"

Now a funereal silence broods over the country. Smoke continues to rise over the ruined village. The eyes of the watchers are fixed on the distant road, where they expect the pointed helmets to appear. But there is nothing. The noise of whistles re-echoes. It is the order to fall back to join the main body of troops. Then Lecointre's disappointment breaks forth:

"We cannot even discharge our guns!"

The 8th forms again in a column, four abreast, and advances into a rich and quiet country. Rows of fine elms make quadrilaterals in the midst of the harvested fields. One might call it a splendid French park. But they have reached the edge of the pla-

teau. The prospect changes as an immense panorama appears. There is a long valley extending two hundred meters below the road; it is misty and fresh in the early morning air. Here and there the belfries point upward among the trees, and a beautiful river nonchalantly wanders along with its silver waters.

"Look there," says Picot, in ecstasy, "what is that?"

Henri Lecointre replies: "You stupid mule, don't you see that it is the Marne?"

On the suspension bridge spanning the river between Verneuil and Dormans we can see a mass of men. It is the infantry falling back on the right bank.

VIII

"THE worst of it all," declares Mademoiselle Louise, sighing, "is not to know anything about them."

She speaks these words in the same instant in which M. Henri surveys the historic river which must still be placed between the enemy and our army. If mademoiselle had second sight she would be somewhat reassured. But for evolving visions she has nothing but a tender and anxious heart. The truth is that M. Henri has never filled so large a place in the shop of the Rue du Cherche-Midi as he has since the day of his departure. Mademoiselle Louise understands now how sweet is the presence of the loved one. It is a treasure she had not valued until it was lost. And when she says, "The worst is not to know anything about them," you have guessed that you should understand: "The worst is not to know anything of him." If she associates Robert Picot with her regrets, it is out of discretion; it is also from politeness to her cousin

Edith, who is present. Madame and Mademoiselle Bouchaud left Choisy-le-Roi last evening. And the Duvals have offered them shelter. This is why, on this September morning, in the bookseller's shop, Xavier des Assernes, come to read his new chapter, has found one more listener.

"If they were still living," continues Edith, controlling her tears, "they would certainly have found means to send news of themselves."

"Soldiers," says M. Duval stoically, "think now of quite other things than their sweethearts. Do you imagine that they are going to waste their time writing nonsense to you?"

And turning toward des Assernes:

"My dear master, if we should listen to these young girls, we should become despondent. But I hope that they may be able to say the contrary, that the menace of the enemy will not disturb the serenity of our spirits, and that the intellectual life of France will continue. That is why I beg you to consent to proceed with your reading."

Customers hardly ever disturb our literary circle any more, and the novelist can settle

himself at ease in the very middle of the shop. Soon his voice begins:

"Lord Mainfroy of Catalpan went through the mountains to the castle of his uncle, the count of Foix, whose standard he carried. And he found many knights who, like himself, were going across the sea. But then he drew off his shoes and stockings and his clothes, leaving nothing but his shirt, and in his shirt went to the cathedral, where the bishop handed him back his sword and his pilgrim's staff and exposed the relics before him.

"While he still remained in the château of Foix, a pious lady, one of the devout women living with the countess, noticed this young squire with proud bearing and gentle face. And she remained quite pensive. If the good countess of Foix, seeing that her devout attendant was disturbed, had urged her to confide her trouble, the lady would doubtless have concealed her amorous thoughts. But the other devout ladies advised her to open her heart to the countess who was the lord of Catalpan's aunt. And the countess, having heard the confession of this noble love, went to her nephew and spoke to him thus:

'Before you depart for this voyage, dear nephew, it is strange to me that you do not choose a lady. I know one called Gisèle. God made her beautiful in body, of noble birth, and with a rare character. If you should resolve to take her as your wife on your return from this voyage, it would be a praiseworthy plan.' To which the lord of Catalpan responded: 'Madame, there is no woman so beautiful in heaven or hell, should she be wiser than the Saracen queen of Sheba, or more noble than the queen of Trebizond, or with a more lovely face than the queen of France, who could make me forget her whom I cherish devotedly, that is to say, Mirabelle of Pampeluna.' After this the squire departed, faithful to his lady. And he carried the standard of the count of Foix. And they rode forty days and forty nights until they arrived at Aigues-Mortes, where the galleons were waiting. And then the lord of Catalpan and the count of Argentan hired a galleon together and embarked on the sea without fear, because God had placed a courageous spirit in their bodies. And all of the time they pulled through the seas, the knight, Main-

froy, stayed in the prow of the ship, his forehead in his hand, dreaming of Mirabelle of Pampeluna."

Thus continues des Assernes, while his impassive auditors follow, according to their different tastes and temperaments, the poetry of this mediæval tale. I beg you to notice with me that the Germans are advancing each day toward Paris, that the goods of these four persons and even their lives are menaced; that the most cruel disquietude oppresses their hearts concerning those whom they love, and that no one feels more than they the great and noble anguish of knowing that their country is in danger. But there is in the French spirit, at first sight, an excessive shyness, which likes to conceal under an apparent calm the most fiery emotions of the soul, and also a coquetry which carries itself with elegance in the midst of the worst moral crises. And who knows whether these four persons, nourished on exalted thoughts, do not find comfort in reliving in this legend the most beautiful years of early French life, in the hour when France, and all that she possesses, is in the greatest peril she has ever known?

IX

"LECOINTRE, Henri," cries a sergeant of the 8th, "the captain is asking for you."

The regiment has passed the night in a settlement of three large farms abandoned by their inhabitants. At this moment Lecointre and Picot, with their red trousers as their sole garments, are washing their shirts in the pond. It is a luxury that has been impossible for three weeks. But we must acknowledge that in the weariness of the retreat, exhausted by the heat, burning with thirst, each one in his turn surreptitiously has undone the strap of his knapsack, and that now all the bundles, one by one, lie along the roads. Therefore they have no change of clothes. "Lecointre, Henri," dresses himself again and, in the classic costume of a flour-dealer, questions his friend anxiously:

"Hey, Picot, is it all right for me to go to speak to the captain in this rig?"

"It is a bit negligée, old fellow. But slip

on your greatcoat, and put on your necktie to hide your undress."

Near the hedge men wrangle for places to dry their linen in the sun. Farther away, in the open air, others have put thirty fowls on the spit. The skewers are made of beech-wood and blaze up from time to time, so that the roast rolls in the ashes, filling the cooks with noisy glee.

The captain is quartered in one of the farm kitchens. He is still quite young. He says to M. Henri:

"Lecointre, are you the man for quite a dangerous reconnoitring party?"

"Yes, captain."

"Do you know that the Germans are hiding in the wood overlooking this place, opposite us?"

"Yes, captain."

"Very well, we have the order to attack to-morrow morning at dawn, the 8th in front. About all this not a word, Lecointre. I count on your silence."

"Yes, captain."

"But first I need to be certain about the strength of the enemy and their system of de-

fense, for we fear that they have fortified themselves in the wood. We need two determined men, ready to give their lives for victory, who will try to enter the wood to-night to obtain information. You have understood?"

"Yes, captain."

"Do you know another, as courageous as you, who will risk his skin in the same way?"

"Yes, captain; his name is Picot, Robert. He is also in the 8th."

The captain looks Lecointre in the eyes. He measures this reliable soldier; he estimates him and he considers his powers. And no doubt a vision passes before his eyes: this jovial fellow knocked down on the grass, by a ball, before the attack. It would be a pity. He purses his mouth and shuts his eyes as if there was a grain of sand in them.

"In the name of the 8th I thank you, Lecointre. Ah! I almost forgot. You are a corporal."

Monsieur Henri's face shines.

"Thank you, captain."

Do you know what occupies Monsieur Henri almost as long as the day lasts? Well,

it is to find the insignia to sew on his sleeve. Of course the outfitting store has gone to the devil, and officer's stripes are not found in farm rooms. Nevertheless, the important matter of this day is not that he is going to be killed during the coming night, no; it is the honor that has just come to him, it is the mysterious thing that raises him above his squad; it is his new rank.

"You can't get it," said a sergeant of the second section, in conclusion. "I have kept my band of stripes in the bottom of my pocket. It was a souvenir. So much the worse. Take it."

Now the night, already longer in September, spreads over the country! In the stables and the barns the men huddle up for the night. Robert Picot and the corporal Lecointre remain sitting, with pipes in their mouths, on the edge of the watering-trough. When they see that the bowls of their pipes make a red dot in the darkness, it is because the darkness is favorable and they will leave. But a curious thing happens. Now that their comrades are sleeping, invisible in their shelters, and the two friends find themselves alone

in the cool night, humid and threatening, all the horror of peril is present to their imagination, as well as the difficulties of the enterprise.

"It is foolish for us to do it," says Lecointre.

"Yes, it is foolish," says Picot. "We shall certainly not return."

"And down there," continues the corporal, "they will never know how we have fallen."

A silence reigns while a chorus of frogs swells in a neighboring pond.

"Say then, Picot, it makes a confounded impression on you to think that we shall never see them again, doesn't it?"

Picot doesn't respond. He is not able to respond. He sees Edith's charming eyes again and her farewell smile. Lecointre himself sees Louise once more and the paradise it would have been to be loved by her. Seated on the edge of a watering-trough for farm horses, Picot and Lecointre coldly measure the value of their lives, which they are offering to their country, not suspecting that they strangely resemble their remote model, Mainfroy of Catalpan, sitting in the bow of his ship and thinking of his lady. They are of

his race and French knights like him, and you have observed it.

"I think that it is time to go," remarks Lecointre.

"It is time," replies Picot simply.

They have guns slung on their shoulders, and one hundred and twenty cartridges apiece. The night is perfectly dark. They skirt a hedge separating a meadow from the harvested field where they are walking. In the meadow their forms are better concealed than on the bare fields. Both meadow and fields are exposed to the observation of the enemy. Like cats, they make a gap in the hedge and slip through. Now they have reached the dark grass.

"Let us stoop down," says Picot. "It is safer."

I do not know whether you see clearly the setting of the scene: land rising gently to a departmental road which encircles the foot of the hill; near the highway the slope descends abruptly, bristling with young trees and bushes, and about one hundred and twenty-four meters higher is the beech wood where the Germans are hiding. They are able

to follow the slightest movements of the French regiments in the valley. Never mind, they have not seen the two black masses lying in the grass. But when, after having progressed for twenty minutes in this very difficult manner, the two friends leap over the ditch bordering the road, and find themselves on the white highway, where their silhouettes are visible in the night, fireworks burst overhead. It is the sentinels firing their guns on the suspected shadows. The bullets scatter. Instinctively Lecointre falls and pretends to be dead. Picot turns distractedly to his comrade.

"You are hit, you poor old fellow!"

The corporal almost wants to smile over the trick so well played. But it is no time for playfulness. He whispers imperiously: "Stop fooling and do the same."

And there are two corpses stretched in the dust. Not a start. Not a movement. Not a breath. A half-hour passes. Then, imperceptibly, a hand reaches out, a limb stretches itself, a foot moves. In a few minutes each corpse covers several millimeters. In an hour the two friends have reached the thicket.

Now they are in comparative safety. The rustling made by their bodies in the branches might be the sound of animals in the night. In this instant their minds work with extraordinary clearness. The truth is, they are sacrificed. But, if they should succeed, what a prize to-morrow as the reward of victory!

When they place their ears to the ground they hear the jargon of the Germans. They direct their stealthy course toward the sentinels at a distance. They creep in between two posts. Something of the intoxication of death defied, of the success hoped for, of the divine cause they serve, has taken possession of them. They are overexcited, beside themselves. They can hardly keep from shouldering their rifles, when they see the enemy's camp, where they would like to fire two hundred and forty bullets. To ascertain all of the meaning of this German advance-guard, it would be necessary to reach the platform, which is impossible. But from the underbrush where they are hiding they can see the forms rolled in their blankets, sleeping on the moss and without fortification. It is a temporary camp: the Boches are certainly not

prepared for the French menace. They still expect to make further progress toward Paris to-morrow.

Then, with scratched faces and bloody hands, the book-clerk and the glove-seller let themselves fall gently into the ravine, catching themselves here and there on the rocks and branches.

X

MADEMOISELLE LOUISE has uttered a cry in sorting the mail:

"A letter from Monsieur Henri!"

The letter is dated the 10th of September. It has taken seven days to come from the front. What difference does it make? It has arrived and now Mademoiselle Louise, white as death, her two elbows on the counter and her forehead in her hands, reads and rereads it without being able to take her eyes away. I will tell you, moreover, what the letter contains:

"My dear Louise, I love you and we are victorious. These are the two great pieces of news, these are the two splendid facts, this is all that fills my soul, and I am beside myself as I write. I knew what it was to love you, Louise, but I did not know what one experiences when he sees his country invaded, and when he recovers it again, and when before his gun the enemies scatter like rabbits. I know it now and I love you all the more.

When I fight it is of you that I think. I do not want these brigands to reach Paris, and it seems to me that it was you they injured in injuring France. And when, in their daily orders, our superior officers talk of the France for which we must all die if it is necessary, the vision I see has your large black eyes and your thoughtful brow, and the grave smile of your mouth.

"Louise, I do not know anything about you now. Have you never written me? Don't you receive my letters? I have told you that we were forced to cross the Marne and that we fell back sadly. These are the terrible days that I want to forget. But day before yesterday an order came to take the offensive. Picot and I were intrusted with quite a difficult mission. It was to go, before the attack, and observe the enemy's position in a wood overlooking us. Tell Mademoiselle Edith that Picot is brave as anything. In spite of his nervous manner, he never loses his composure. He stood by me splendidly in this enterprise when death awaited us every second. We were able to inform our superiors as to the situation of the Boches, and the

sun had not yet risen in the morning when we charged toward the small forest. The bugles sounded like mad. It was as if, hidden behind the stack where they had shielded themselves, they had gone crazy. Our poor captain fell the first, hit in the forehead by a bullet. For from above, as they scrambled up, four machine-guns stopped the besiegers, and I assure you that all of those who started did not reach the summit. But, upon my word, those who put their feet on the plateau had the best of it! Ah! what helter-skelter confusion among the Boches! In five seconds the wood was empty.

"Then we turned around and looked at the valley below. I shall never forget the shock of astonishment at the sight of that immense army, an ocean of red trousers rushing along all of the southern roads. They were in the fields, the meadows, and the farmyards. They swarmed at a distance along the roads, and they advanced, they advanced without ceasing behind us, to fling themselves into the pursuit of the gray beasts.

"Soon all this mass, formed into divisions, began the chase methodically. We no longer

marched, we flew. We crossed the wood, the fields of lucern or oats, and went through the villages. We crossed the streams on the plank of the sluice-gates. We finally arrived in sight of a large town. They told me it was Epernay. The Marne wound in and out over the landscape. At this instant there was a great explosion, as if the town were crumbling to pieces. It was the dirty beasts trying to blow up the bridge behind us to keep us back. But the Marne, we were quite content to cross it again, which we easily did by swimming. We made a détour and reached it again and the pursuit continued.

"I am writing these lines in the corner of a little wood, where I am crouched in one of the trenches we have now dug to protect ourselves against a possible return of the enemy. It is on a height overlooking the country, and I see in the fog below, fifteen kilometers from here, the cathedral of Rheims, with its lonely aspect in a desert of mist. I can distinguish its noble structure and two square towers. So all of my French history is spread out before my eyes. To-morrow we are going to retake Rheims, Louise. And I am glad to live, for if

I am not dead, I was within an ace of it, and I cannot bear to leave you. But I have done my duty, and I believe that you will not be ashamed of me and I love you."

This is the contents of the first love letter which Mademoiselle Louise has received in her life. Do you think that the lord Mainfroy of Catalpan, whom we have left in the prow of his ship thinking of Mirabelle of Pampeluna and eager to kill the Saracens, could have spoken any better?

XI

THE war has continued for nine months. After the cruel winter the April sun shows itself at last. The little flowers bud and open on the breastwork of the trenches. Robert Picot, who is now adjutant of the 8th, thus outstripping Monsieur Henri, who is still wearing his sergeant stripes, exclaims lightly this morning:

"It must be fine at Choisy-le-Roi."

"Pity yourself, old man; you will pass the spring in the wood!"

Monsieur Henri speaks thus to put him on the wrong scent. He really thinks:

"How beautiful it must be in the Rue du Cherche-Midi!"

The wood in question, besides, has no foliage. It would be better to call this place an enormous wood-yard of old buildings where the planks stand upright in various places. It is impossible to tell, from these broken posts, whether it is really springtime. But, strange

to say, one hears at the same time the cannon and the larks. The little Gallic bird is not frightened away by anything so small. We are here in Lorraine, in the open forest of Parroy. There is a vague rumor that an attack is to be undertaken in two or three days, perhaps to-morrow. It fills the air with electricity. Whispers circulate in the trenches. They are obliged to stop the talk of the babblers. Every one is excited. In the lodgings of the non-commissioned officers, at mealtime, one hears laughter that must be suppressed at the thought of the Boches, scarcely one hundred meters away. I shall not deny that there is a little nervousness in this gayety. Existence is brief. They say that it will last until to-morrow. From now until then it seems as if every moment were brief, terribly fugitive, and at the same time delightful. A little sergeant, twenty years old, exhibits the picture of his sweetheart. The chief of the mess, the sergeant-major, a territorial, relates how he was married by proxy. Lecointre smokes his pipe in silence. In his pocketbook against his heart is a piece of paper which burns a little. It is a letter from Made-

moiselle Louise, and it is so nice, this letter is so nice, that he could not help reading it to Picot. Picot is happy for Lecointre, but he himself is sad. There is no danger that Mademoiselle Edith will write him the little nothings that go to the heart of a man, such as: "This morning, when I woke, my first thought was of you." Lucky fellow, that Lecointre! Picot did not demand as much of Mademoiselle Edith. Only a little less ceremony in her letters.

"Ah!" says the sergeant-major with animation, "let us hope for the end, when each of us will return to his own affairs!"

"If only we don't stick, to-morrow, on the barbed wire," says the little sergeant.

But he has not finished his sentence when a cataclysm throws them to the ground, bespattered with sand and clay. It seems as if a whole express-train were hurling itself upon them, to crush them into the ground. In fact, it is a great shell exploding on its arrival in their trench. Adjutant Picot stands upright the first and questions: "No casualties here?"

The little sergeant sneezes, runs his fingers

through his hair, and flings forth the usual phrase:

"As many are killed as wounded, no one is dead."

"You see, by heaven, that one always escapes," says the territorial.

Lecointre slips his hand under his great-coat to assure himself that Louise's letter is always there.

Now the day declines. The first reconnoitring rocket of electric blue flares up from the Boches. From a sector to one side comes a noise of firing. The small crescent of the moon appears in the sky over the jagged top of a pine-tree. Sergeant Lecointre makes his round to inspect the men on the battlement. He meets Picot conducting a gang of workmen:

"Where are you going?"

The words are scarcely spoken, but whispered as if it were at the bedside of an invalid. The light of the blinding rockets is reflected from time to time on the faces of the two friends lost in the darkness of the subsoil.

"The commandant has sent me down there

to the listening post to build a lookout. You see, they are carrying the planks."

"Nasty business, old fellow; look out for yourself."

"Do you think so? There is no danger," says Picot.

However, they press each other's hands in parting.

By the branch of the trench, so deep that its wall is half a meter higher than the tallest man, Picot goes to the listening post. This April night bathed in moonlight is a little intoxicating. Picot remembers certain walks on the border of the Seine in Edith Bouchaud's company on similar moonlight nights. One did not hear the cannon, or the crackling of the guns, for instance. He was his own master, at home on good French soil. How happy he was then, and how he thirsts this evening to be happy again! It seems to him at times that the slender form of Edith is enfolded in his arms, and that he is carrying her away with him, tenderly, in the blue light. She will not ever know the important mission that has come to him to-day, in expectation of the next attack. However, he does not feel the slight-

est beating of his heart, and he says to himself that perhaps, if she were able to see him here, this evening, she would love him because he is brave.

There are three gunners for the machine-guns in the post, and four simple fellows on guard, of whom one is on the lookout. The arrival of the adjutant is greeted with silence, for this is the kingdom of mutes. Picot listens.

"Fritz! Fritz!" calls a voice in the night.

That comes from the Boche trench, twenty meters away. They are seen through the loop-hole, describing an arc of an immense circle which seems to hem in our line. But through this hole observation is difficult. Picot understands the major's wish. He begins to clear off the parapet, that he may wedge in slabs of wood horizontally two or three millimeters apart and replace bags of earth above. Then they have a magnificent observation post, thanks to this improvised ledge. Upon my word, the first who climbs upon this parapet will risk a great deal, in spite of the tacit understanding that one hardly fires at the listening post from one line

to another. The workers look questioningly at Picot, anxiously trying to find out who he will appoint for the work.

"Give me your pick," he says to one of the men.

"Here it is, lieutenant."

And clinging to the projection in the wall, he leaps upon the parapet and begins to dig. Oh, he works quickly. The men in the opposite observation post are no doubt transfixed with amazement, but during the few minutes that the operation lasts not a gun is fired there. Here the men hold their breath. At a sign the adjutant has the boards placed in the prepared hole. Below nothing stirs. Now the last plank is wedged in. Picot calculates the advantage it will be to-morrow to observe from there without being seen. A glow of satisfaction fills his soul. There is nothing more to do but replace the sacks on the ground. Suddenly there is the fatal click of a gun, a man in the throes of death, a mass falling down in the post. Well aimed! The adjutant's chest is penetrated by a bullet.

Robert Picot breathes heavily. The beloved form that shortly before seemed folded

in his arms now bends over his face. He thinks then: "It is ended, I am dying, I am losing her forever." In this moment his chest seems to burst, his ribs are torn to pieces, warm blood rises to his mouth and he cannot breathe. And at the same time that a volley of shots rends the air, men are heard crying in a low voice the dismal call:

"Stretcher-bearers! . . . Stretcher-bearers!"

XII

THE same April sun that bathes the front and makes the wet trenches smoke between Nieuport and the Vosges shines also in the Rue du Cherche-Midi and throws a bright ray into M. Duval's shop, where des Assernes makes his spring appearance.

"The official news is not bad," says the bookseller, "but here it is said that the brigands are poisoning our poor soldiers with their asphyxiating gas in the Ypres sector."

"Are they speaking of Lorraine?" questions Louise, as she adds her accounts at the desk.

But des Assernes speaks in a low voice:

"These asphyxiating gases, these inflammable liquids and all these barbarous proceedings that modern warfare had banished and which the barbarians have found necessary to use again I find in another form in the epic of the lord of Catalpan. When a tempest on the sea had driven his ship and all the flotilla carrying the French army in sight of the Saracen country, the amber-colored figures of the

Turks appeared on the shore, gesticulating like savages. And I imagine that this must have been to these good French gentlemen, as naïve as they were fearless, like a vision of devils. But even from the sea they began the battle and tried to shoot their arrows. Do you know how the Saracens replied? Well, before the knight of Mirabelle, accompanied by his friend, the count d'Argentan, had landed, or, rather, left his ship to go through the shallow water to the shore, they were attacked by Greek fire, and urns full of lime were hurled at them by the engines of the infidel. You know that Greek fire burns in the water, and that it was able to encircle these small ships. Such an attack was calculated to shake the resolution of my leonine knight. It is then that, according to the Languedoc troubadour, this sublime dialogue took place between Mainfroy and the count d'Argentan: 'My lord, we are lost, for these demons want to burn us like torches,' says the count. 'Sir,' says Mainfroy, 'it is better to burn here below for the glory of the kingdom of France, than to burn in hell for mortal sins.' 'But,' says the count, 'if we were burned in these

ships, then we could not serve the kingdom of France any more, nor fight the infidels. Call the sailors to put the ship out to sea so that we may save ourselves and escape the flames.' 'Sir,' says the knight, 'it is an ugly thing to flee. I have come to Barbary for the honor of France and the glory of my lady who lives in her castle of Pampeluna. I would rather a thousand times be burned to cinders here than return to her in a state of disgrace and confusion.' And my author adds that with those words, facing flaming projectiles, the two lords remained standing behind their shield, whose point was driven in the deck of the ship. What a picture! What a sight! All of the caravels kept together under the rain of fire thrown toward them by the mangonels on the shore, and at the bow of each ship, while the sailors rowed, the knights remained immovable, waiting to be burned or to see the battle. Then the heavens were in such a state of continuous agitation that the elements aided the knights: the wind changed and carried the fire back toward the villains, so well that it was the crafty Saracens who ended by being

burned alive, near their own contrivances. At this moment the ship struck against a sand-bank. The good knights, the water reaching up to their coats, walked, the shield in their hands and their lances pointed toward the infidels. Mainfroy of Catalpan went by the side of the count of Foix, who carried the standard. And he held it in his hand with such assurance that all of the men at arms were filled with his courage. The infidels gave way everywhere when he showed himself. They fought even in the narrow Saracen streets. The town was half taken. The king of France had already delivered many Christians who had been groaning in the prisons for long years, when an arrow, shot by a famous archer lying in wait for the valorous knight, struck the chest of Mainfroy of Catalpan. He fell, banner in hand, on the border of a gushing fountain at the intersection of four streets. The enemies bound him with chains and carried him on their horses with savage cries."

"But did the crusaders take the whole village?" inquires Mademoiselle Louise.

"Ah! Ah! young lady!" exclaims des As-

sernes, "that is a fair question, and truly French curiosity. The result of our fighting in an imaginary battle taking place in the thirteenth century concerns your heart more than the fate of a hero with whom you nevertheless seem to me to be in love to a certain extent! You may know that the town was taken by the king of France, and that soon the beautiful Mirabelle in her château of Pampeluna was warned by a dream of the captivity of her knight."

"At that time," observes Madame Duval judiciously, "there were no postal districts."

"Precisely, madame," says des Assernes, "but also the good God will send you dreams to keep you in touch with what happens to the dear absent ones. It is very poetic."

"I see just now the postman crossing the street," says M. Duval, "and because I don't despise my epoch, I would rather receive a letter from my brave Lecointre than to dream of these pictures of the past."

They do not speak any more, they wait; they are more or less in suspense, concentrated on the movements of the postman, who seems to take a haughty pride in being wanted.

The dispenser of news, locking up in his mysterious box all joys and griefs, knows that eyes are following his smallest step. He does not hurry. He has plenty of time.

Here at last is a letter from Monsieur Henri! It is for Louise, and Louise utters a cry as she reads it: "My God! Monsieur Robert is terribly wounded!"

Ignoring the sentimental lines of the missive, concerning no one but herself, Mademoiselle Louise reads aloud to her startled auditors the heroic story. Robert Picot, the little glove-seller of the *Meilleur Marché*, the angler, is fallen, braving danger, for France and for those he loves, like the lord of Catalpan, the leonine cavalier. Both received the same wound.

"Robert is a hero," wrote Sergeant Lecointre. "His men are still under the spell of their enthusiasm. I saw one of them crying, thinking that he was dead. Alas! he is not likely to recover. His wound is one that rarely heals."

The people in the shop are stupefied. They remember the delightful Sundays at Choisy: sun, verdure, soft rippling of water on the

bank; the rocking of the yawl anchored under the silver willows; abundant dinners, legs of mutton dripping with juice, golden, tender chickens, fragrant strawberries under the buzz of a stray wasp in the Henri II dining-room. And they see once more the self-effacing personality, timid and silent, of Monsieur Robert, his eyes shy and glowing in his sallow face.

"He never had any chance!" declares the bookseller.

"Such a charming boy!" continues Madame Duval with further praise.

"And who loved Edith so much!" adds Louise.

A silence follows, wet with furtive tears. Des Assernes sits dreaming. He thinks of this army of young men whose narrow outlook and small ambitions he deplored, before the war. "Paladins! Paladins!" he murmurs to himself now, quite beside himself with melancholy excitement; "who was then mistaken, you or we? We have, ourselves, committed the sin of not believing in you, and of misunderstanding you, and of thinking that France is decadent. And here you are show-

ing yourselves glorious each day. Alas! Will you all remain there? Will he not return?"

"Do you remember," sighs the excellent Madame Duval, "the day he caught the four-pound pike?"

XIII

NOW Louise Duval at her uncle Bouchaud's side travels in the Choisy-le-Roi train across the market-garden country full of memories.

"It is better for you to come with me, my dear Louise," says the good uncle, assuming a very stolid air (a department head does not fall into a fainting fit because one of his clerks has his lungs pierced by a Boche bullet. A man is a man, by Jove . . .). "It will be better on Edith's account, for, to tell the truth, he was her lover. Young girls understand each other. They can tell such things in a delicate way without being upset by it. And then Edith is reserved. One doesn't know exactly what she is thinking about. She was formerly a little haughty with this poor Picot; now I imagine that she is softened; I thought that I noticed sometimes that her expression changed when she received his letters. After all, perhaps, I am mistaken. With you young ladies, one is always perplexed.

Never mind, you manage it all, my dear Louise, so that it is not too severe a blow. Poor Picot! After all, he was an outsider to us. On the front, we know well that there must be wounds. Isn't it true that others have fallen, and that still others will fall? It is war. But, do you know, my lass, this boy . . . this boy . . ."

The department head stops, his face all at once very red. With a motion he drops the window, breathes a whiff of fresh air, rolls his wild eyes, and ends by confessing heavily:

"He was like a son to me!"

Louise is warm-hearted. She is also very much agitated. Especially as they are arriving at Choisy and the moment is approaching when she must torture the heart of her dear Edith. Louise knows Edith's secret. The glove-seller has become a hero. It was all that was lacking to awaken love in the enthusiastic heart of Mademoiselle Bouchaud. The two young girls now are also consumed with anxiety for each other. What will happen to Edith when she hears of the wounding of her knight!

The April twilight is stealing over the vil-

lage of Choisy. The stone summer-house can be seen at a distance, already wrapped in shadows. The windows are closed. "How sad it all looks!" thinks Louise. The niece and uncle climb the front steps. Some one opens the door. Madame Bouchaud and her daughter are silently embroidering under the lamp. Cries of surprise. Emotion. What a pleasure! Here is Louise! The parents understand each other at once with a glance. They leave the two cousins together. See how Louise's tears run down her cheeks. Edith is dismayed. She neither questions nor entreats. As Papa Bouchaud says, young girls understand each other. One tear was enough. Edith has turned pale; she murmurs, as if half unconscious: "Robert is killed!"

"No, my dear, no," replies Louise, with a thousand caresses, "they will save him, on the contrary. Only wounded! And under such glorious circumstances. Henri wrote to me, you know. Robert is a hero."

She has done well. Edith's sorrow bursts forth. There are convulsive sobs and floods of tears and broken confessions of a tender heart unloading itself.

"I love him so much now, Louise, if you knew. I felt that I was about to lose him. . . . Each day I am more attached to him . . . but I do not dare tell him . . . What a fool I was, my God! You understand, Louise, when he was employed in the *Meilleur Marché* I despised him. Do you remember? I said to you: 'It is so commonplace to marry a clerk!' The truth is that I did not know Robert. Evidently one has no need of heroism to sell gloves. It would have been ridiculous to use it there where it was so little needed. But I demanded it at any cost. I said to you: 'If only he were an aviator!' And he noticed my scorn. Meanwhile, he possessed all the qualities of his own spirit and I would not see them. Now I do not dare to tell him straightforwardly what I feel for him. That is to say, yesterday, I did not venture. My God! My God! Why did I not tell him before he dies?"

"But, my dear, we hope that he will soon recover."

And Louise discusses before her distracted cousin each one of the expressions of the letter scribbled by Monsieur Henri:

"He lost much blood; the stretcher-bearers dressed his wounds thoroughly in the trench itself; then the brave men, very gently, laid him out on the stretcher and carried him as one carries a cradle, keeping step, in time. He was quite conscious."

"You see," moans Edith, "he lost much blood; it must have been a hemorrhage! But no, just a simple dressing was enough. And notice this—'he was quite conscious!'"

"At the relief station our little assistant doctor, who performs miracles, was agitated when he recognized him, for they ate together at the mess of the non-commissioned officers. He could only say: 'Ah! my poor Picot!' Then it seemed as if Picot smiled as he said: 'I am done for!' But the doctor replied: 'You still have a good brain!' And he went down on his knees to care for his wound and pour tincture of iodine on it. And as that is frightfully painful, he held him and pressed his hand at the same time."

"If I had only been there!" murmurs Edith, hiding her face on Louise's shoulder.

As this moment some one opens the door timidly. Edith straightens up and wipes her

eyes, and they see Monsieur Bouchaud in his shirt-sleeves, standing in the doorway without venturing to come in. He could not resist the temptation to know how the little one had received the shock. Ah! he was very much afraid of this recoil. A father senses things without being told. Unfortunately he feels that he is awkward in offering consolation in a sorrowful love-affair.

"Don't be worried, little daughter," he murmurs. "It doesn't help anything."

But you may easily imagine that the excellent advice is without effect on Edith's spirit, and her tears, on the contrary, flow faster than ever. Then Monsieur Bouchaud comes forward, playing with the gold watch-charm ornamenting his waistcoat. He is desperate not knowing the words of comfort to speak to his little one. He ends by putting his shirt-sleeves around her as he says, quite simply, crying at the same time: "My poor little rabbit . . ."

"Now," continues Louise, who is reading the letter, "my brave friend is being treated in a good hospital in Lunéville, twelve kilometers from here. He is well cared for. In

spite of the gravity of his wound, we are able to hope that he may live."

But now Edith raises her head. Instantly her tears are dried up. Her lovely blue eyes, dimmed by many tears, become resolute and imperious. She inquires:

"At Lunéville?"

"Monsieur Henri himself says that there is hope," observes Monsieur Bouchaud.

But Edith repeats, as if inspired:

"At Lunéville!"

And all at once:

"But I wish to go to Lunéville! I wish to go to see him. I want to . . . to . . . press his hand before he dies. He has no mother, he has no sister, he has no one, he has only me, who would have been his wife some day. My duty is to go, to go quickly!"

Blonde and frail Edith! No one has ever seen her so fearless and so determined. The tone of her voice prostrates poor Papa Bouchaud, who does not try to resist her, but falls into an armchair.

"To Lunéville! She wishes to go to Lunéville! But, unhappy child, you do not know what danger you are risking! Reread the

letter of your uncle's clerk; you see that it is twelve kilometers from the firing-line. You want to face cannon, bombs, and Taubes. Ah! there is nothing we lack but that!"

"I do not fear cannon and Taubes," said Edith. "I will go."

Here Madame Bouchaud enters, in her turn, with swollen eyes, unreconciled.

"The soup will be cold," she says sweetly. But the father points to his daughter:

"She wants to go to Lunéville!"

Madame Bouchaud is not frightened. There are suggestions to which one does not respond. The one repeated by M. Bouchaud is one of these. For Madame Bouchaud it is exactly as if one said of a little child: "He wants to go to the moon."

"Let us go to the table while we are waiting," she resumes sagely.

In the dining-room, while the girls stay in the salon to arrange their hair and freshen their altered faces, the department head says to his wife, as he cuts the bread:

"Listen, mamma, it will not do to hold her back. Her heart is too deeply involved. Young girls are like still water. One does not

know them. Little daughter masks her play. What will you have! Remember the time when you were her age. But I am no longer able to see her cry as I saw her just now. It upsets me. It makes me ill. It spoils my appetite. We must let her go to Lunéville, mamma. And then, who knows? This poor Picot is so smitten, on his side, that a visit from his future wife may restore him. I, too, have been twenty-five years old, by George!"

"And if this little girl is killed at Lunéville?" demands Madame Bouchaud, as she crosses her arms, forcibly closing the argument.

But the department head replies dully, hiding his emotions:

"Well, there will be one more heroine for France."

XIV

INDISSOLUBLE fellowship of the French family! Marvellous cohesion! Powerful solidarity! I shall not tell you here all of the dramas that were arranged during one week at the Bouchauds' and the Duvals', around Edith's phrase: "I want to go to Lunéville." But you know the household of Choisy-le-Roi and of the Rue du Cherche-Midi well enough now to imagine that she did not go alone. Who, then, will be torn from the familiar group? What stone shall be detached from the edifice? It seems quite natural that it should be Madame Bouchaud. Is it not the rôle of a mother to take a young daughter to her wounded fiancé? But in response to Edith's request, Madame Bouchaud, stupefied, amazed, and incapable of understanding the inanity of such a prayer, answers with one word:

"See, do you think that I would leave papa?"

On his part, because of the needs of the

present hour, Monsieur Bouchaud was, according to his characteristic expression, bound to the *Meilleur Marché*, without private interests, like a soldier at his post. Then Edith comes to the Rue du Cherche-Midi and says to Madame Duval:

"Auntie, will you take me to Lunéville?"

Madame Duval's arms fall, her eyes grow large, she stammers:

"Take you to Lunéville! But my poor child, how could I leave your uncle?"

Edith has nothing to reply. She knows what is possible and what is not. She turns to the bookseller. A man is more independent of family ties. Louise, who knows enough about selling books, could replace him in the shop, aided by Madame Duval. But Uncle Duval refuses with these words:

"Little girl, during these twenty-six years that we have been married I have never been anywhere, even to Choisy-le-Roi, without my wife. I know your aunt. She drowns herself in a glass of water and makes a mountain out of a grain of sand. If the least business difficulty arises in my absence, here is a woman who will lose her head. Ah! It would cer-

tainly have been a fine trip, and I should have been happy not only to press the hand of this heroic Picot, but to have part in the excitement of a town at the front rather than to grow musty in my shop, as I have done since the beginning of the war. But it is impossible, my child. I should be too uneasy about my wife and Louise."

Then Louise says:

"Very well, I will go with poor Edith myself!"

At this all of the shocked parents utter loud cries. "Two young girls alone, nonsense! And in case of bombardment, what would they do?"

You must begin to fear that Edith will never go to Lunéville. I can assure you that Edith fears it even more than you. Happily, Xavier des Assernes was there. He was unobtrusively present at these difficult family scenes. He is the fascinated witness, finding there the whole of French psychology, the tender character, anxious and alarmist, of our family affection. Finally he cries:

"I will escort these young ladies as far as Lunéville."

And they go.

As the railroad carries them along the valley of the Marne, where the young girls gather on the wing, like a consecrated bouquet, all of the memories of the great victory, des Assernes beguiles the hours by recalling the past and the history of Mirabelle.

"This gentlewoman," he says to Edith, "was less fortunate than you. When a dream showed her dear knight pierced by a Saracen arrow and his chest bathed with blood on the edge of the fountain where the Turks were coming to load him with chains, she must have been prevented from going to see him. The troubadour tells us that, waking from this dream, she ran through all the rooms of the castle, with dishevelled hair, like a maniac and weeping torrents of tears. There was reason for it, ladies. Mirabelle of Pampeluna knew that the Saracens had no Red Cross nurses, and she might have had her doubts as to the way the knight of Catalpan would be cared for by the infidels. Nevertheless, it was to their interest to keep such a fine prize. And they cured the count with herbs. Meanwhile Mirabelle prayed to Our Lady, repeating

without ceasing: 'Help! Help! Our Lady! I would rather a thousand times be captive in a Saracen tower, in place of my beloved knight!' And she repeated it so often that finally God and His Mother took pity and did as she desired, that is to say when she opened her eyes one morning the lady found herself lying on a little straw by the side of a half-empty jug of water, and bound with rings and chains to the pillar of a vast room in a castle in Barbary. She realized that her wish was granted, that she had taken the place of Mainfroy, while the knight enjoyed, in his turn, a certain amount of comfort in the castle of Pampeluna."

As Louise and even Edith, in spite of their melancholy, are unable to repress a smile at this point, des Assernes explains to them:

"The literature of that time is full of deeds no less marvellous than this. Invisible transportations and substitutions were ordinary occurrences. I am not giving you a course in magic. This is what happened. I cannot tell you otherwise. The two heroes were interchanged and the beautiful Mirabelle praised God that she had thus delivered her knight."

"Meantime, they continued to be separated as in the past!" objects the tender Edith.

Des Assernes was about to continue the narrative, when he was stopped by an exclamation from Louise. They were crossing an open, green, level country, and in a field were some mounds surmounted by a cross. They were the graves of soldiers interred there the day after the battle of the Marne. They were stretched out in this beautiful reconquered ground, clad in their red trousers and their dark-blue coats, deluged with blood. From what corner of France had they come to fall here, pursuing the invaders? They were all young. No doubt Monsieur Henri and Monsieur Robert had passed that way among them. They might have been sleeping to-day under one of these little hillocks. And the hearts of the young girls swell miserably. A little farther on one of the roads an interminable file of covered carts are passing in a straight line, like a caravan in the desert, jolting their little canopies of green cloth, dragged by powerful horses. They are the convoys of the commissary department, en route for the front. The three friends are silent. They

are coming more and more into the sphere of war. The air they breathe is quite different, a new atmosphere. At Nancy, on the station platform, a noise like the unloading of trucks makes Edith and Louise start.

It is the firing of batteries on the Vosges front.

It is exactly eleven days since Adjutant Picot has received his terrible wound on the parapet of the listening post, and this morning his hospital nurse, as she undoes his dressing and lays bare the gaping wound, exclaims:

"But it is doing very well to-day!"

The major is in the little room, just at this moment, where the non-commissioned officers are cared for. They call him. He examines the wound; the insect-like feelers of his nickel forceps make a delicate exploration while Picot's face is slightly drawn. Then there is the auscultation of the injured lung.

"Oh, it is perfect to-day. No fever, no hemorrhage, no expectoration tinged with blood. My friend, you are out of danger."

The good gray-haired nurse and boyish wounded man smile at each other without

saying anything; but in this smile is more than a long discourse. Imagine that for eleven days they have lived without a break near each other, with the one thought of the menace of death and that they must overcome it. They have conquered. It is as if life, with all of its charms, its intoxications, its unexpected joys were suddenly invading the room.

Then the light and agreeable dreams of convalescence come to hover around the adjutant. He would then still march, work, speak, and laugh and love Edith under the trees of Choisy-le-Roi. For one hope never comes quite alone.

And during this time our three travellers are leaving the train at Lunéville. This is the station square where one sees a mass of ruins, collapsed walls, yawning woodwork and shattered homes—the ruins of the bombardment of 1914. Cavalry regiments gallop up the streets, making them vibrate with the noise of the onset, and very heavy motor-trucks, filled with ammunition, pass by with a thundering noise. The dull firing of near-by cannon continuously shakes the ground, and in

the air three aeroplanes come to start on their flight, buzzing like gigantic beetles. It is war.

The swift feet of the two Parisian girls fly also over the sidewalk. The grand Don Quixote, des Assernes, in spite of his longer steps, can hardly keep up with them. Suddenly, above all the noise of the warlike agitation, the solemn notes of a tolling bell break on the air. It is a sudden knell, agonizing, bringing anxiety as it rings. It is the alarm bell. And the passers-by hasten, and people hide, and the rumor spreads:

"It is a Taube!"

Des Assernes trembles because of his responsibilities. He doesn't care for his old bones: but for the two precious children of whom he is the guardian!

"Find a refuge," he urges.

The young women look at each other. The one idea of the loving Edith is clearly seen; Louise responds:

"To the hospital first!"

And at the hospital Robert Picot is properly stretched in his white bed. The white nurse, seated at his side, is writing a letter from his dictation. It is the first he has been allowed,

and he is still only permitted to whisper the words. It is all very intimidating. The adjutant must keep himself to the most commonplace expressions. "Dear Mademoiselle Edith, my wound is better. My thoughts often turn toward you." Poor Picot! no one knows how his heart beats in pronouncing these colorless words.

And at this point the door opens. The silhouette of a young girl, whose black tailor suit reveals a slender waist, enlarged on the hips with flounces, the skirt stopping short above a high shoe, appears and stands on the threshold; the blonde head turns toward all the beds with a circular movement. Picot's heart stops beating. Is it still the fleeting shade that he pressed in his arms through the dark trench? Is it an hallucination of the fever returning? Is it Edith in the flesh? And their eyes meet at last. Edith springs forward with outstretched hands, and the wounded man, forbidden to speak, murmurs very softly: "Edith!"

At once the good, motherly nurse realizes that the letter is of no more consequence. So she smiles and moves away amiably, leav-

ing her place to Edith. Perfect silence, however, continues by the adjutant's bed. They press each other's hands, they read in the divine book of two loving eyes open to the depth of the soul. They confess all that one does not dare to say with ordinary words. Edith asks Picot's pardon for the suffering she has caused him. Picot almost excuses himself for not having always been the hero he is to-day. Then there is a formidable thunder-clap, making the glass window-panes of the room shake. Edith explains very calmly:

"It is a Taube throwing bombs on the town."

How does it all happen? It is very simple: with Monsieur des Assernes and Louise waiting complaisantly in the parlor of the hospital and not coming to greet Monsieur Robert for a long time, until Edith and he may have exhausted their conversation. But dumb conversation is inexhaustible. There are very sweet moments whose flight is invisible. Edith had not realized that she loved Robert so much. Robert had never loved Edith so much. How beautiful life seems to the

wounded man when the good nurse comes to see if it doesn't tire him too much to talk and Edith announces proudly:

"Madame, I am the fiancée of Adjutant Picot."

XV

THE colonel of Picot's and Lecointre's regiment, writing in his little salon, sees a young officer coming toward his lodgings, and, being near-sighted, asks himself which one of his subalterns is coming to disturb him at this early hour. I must inform you that we are at present in Champagne, not far from a little river bordered with poplars, named the Suippe; the colonel's house is dug in a chalky ravine in the middle of a well-known wood called the *Bois Sabot.* The little salon contains, in place of furniture, a bundle of hay for an armchair and a soap-box for a table. Very tame, the colonel's mare, in penetrating the other day as far as this, devoured the bed and the chair in the bedroom. Fortunately, the upholsterer is not far away.

The regiment recently from the trenches has taken shelter here. The word shelter is only a form of speech, for here and there the beeches, rent apart, show the naked white

flesh of their torn trunks, a witness that the great shells come often to visit the wood of repose. Nevertheless, they are sufficiently distant from the lines for the nerves of the men to relax. Burlesque or sentimental songs rise under the lopped trees. Barytones and tenors, in a discordant chorus, mingle the languishing melodies of the waltz with the dramatic accents of *Faust* or of *Mignon*.

All of this music rises from shell-holes filled with rain water, where the men wash their linen, which they spread out to dry afterward on the bushes in the thicket. One sees them from a distance going between the trees, with bare chests, and in dark-blue trousers. With hatchets in their hands they procure wood for screens and work at night.

"Colonel . . ."

"Ah! it is you, Lecointre. What do you want to-day?"

Do not be surprised to see on Monsieur Henri's faded blue sleeve a modest gold officer's stripe. He won it at Eparges, in a counter-attack, taking the head of his section when the chief had fallen. That day they took a French trench from the Boches, and

three hundred meters in depth into the bargain.

"Colonel, I want a leave of absence."

"Ah! Leave of absence, a leave of absence. But if the big machine you know so well lets loose on us during that time?"

I must tell you that we are in August, 1915, and that the great machine in question is the long-awaited offensive.

"Colonel, it seems that the preparations for advance executed by the colonial troops require a few weeks more, and that before seven days, at the least, nothing can possibly happen. On the other hand, my friend Picot, the Adjutant Picot, so gloriously wounded in the forest of Parroy, is convalescing in Paris; if we had been able to see each other there I should have been happy."

"Picot, yes, yes, the very brave Adjutant Picot. Proposed for the medallion of honor, I remember. You have never had any leave, no? Well, my friend, go to Paris. Go to Paris."

The person not seeing Sublieutenant Lecointre cut across the fields to overtake the auto-ambulance for Châlons on the road from

Suippes to Saint-Menehould, does not know how fast a man can run. You must realize that if he is able to catch this vehicle, he will be able to reach the main line and take the Paris train. Realize that a year has passed since Monsieur Henri has seen Mademoiselle Louise, and that Paris means her, and that, if he meets this auto, he will be able as early as to-morrow morning to press her dear hands in his. Now it is no longer a man running, it is a man flying over the trodden earth, where the grass no longer grows. Each leap makes him gain on one of the revolutions of the carriage wheel. At last he is in sight of the auto, which is stopping. An energetic sign makes the chauffeur understand that he must stop. The sublieutenant reaches the step. It seems to him that he has gained the whole world!

At the Châlons station the Paris train is signalled. Monsieur Henri has not even time to send a despatch to the Rue du Cherche-Midi. The train arrives, takes him, and carries him away. Heavens, but the express is slow! Monsieur Henri feels that he could go faster on foot. The dream is so beautiful!

Will it not vanish if it is not seized in time? Having lived through Charleroi, the battle of the Marne, Eparges, the forest of Parroy, Eparges again, the preparation for the Champagne offensive, escaping out of several hells, and to see Louise again in the Rue du Cherche-Midi shop, what a marvel!

On leaving the eastern station Monsieur Henri blinks his eyes a minute at the sight of Paris. His Paris recovered again excites him greatly. Paris, it is the air where Louise breathes; it is the perfume of Louise, and it is an entirely familiar and friendly atmosphere making the old memories live. He jumps into an open taxi. The early passing of the watering carts causes a well known odor to rise under the scorched trees. Here is the Place Saint-Michel and the station for Choisy-le-Roi. Here are the shops before which, not long ago, he often stopped near the disdainful Louise. Louise has changed since then. Her letters have proved it to Lecointre. But what will she say when she sees a hairy and dusty soldier, with faded garments, bleached-out cap and shoes, whitened by the chalk of Champagne? In spite of himself he is

carried back to the story formerly repeated by Monsieur des Assernes, while he waited on customers in the book-shop. Mirabelle of Pampeluna had a cavalier, the lord of Catalpan, who always looked as if he had just stepped out of a bandbox, if one believed the descriptions of the legend. Monsieur Henri, himself, had not had time for the stroke of a brush. You will tell me that before presenting himself in the shop of the Rue du Cherche-Midi, the sublieutenant would have at least gone to the barber. Granted. But it was not his idea, and I can do nothing about it. Here he is, then, at the cross-road of the Croix-Rouge, and here is the street so much desired. Monsieur Henri notices that it has not changed. The houses are always a little crooked and have an atmosphere of Paris of one hundred years ago. The passers-by have a graver air than before the war. There are women in mourning. But the city sweepers perform their work as always. When Monsieur Henri sees in a well known window the yellow series of modern authors he had carefully dusted himself, each morning recently, his heart grows faint. He is generous with

the chauffeur, who looks in a dazzled way at his tip while the officer has already bounded into the shop.

A young woman is there, in the rear, straightening on the shelf the series of Alexandre Dumas. She turns with a gracious movement, making the flounces of her skirt move and revealing her fine figure. She sees an officer just from the front. He looks at her. She hesitates a second, then a divine smile, such as Monsieur Henri had never beheld, brightens up her face. She comes to him without saying anything, a little timid, clasping her arms around the neck of her hero, and embracing him as she murmurs:

"I am so proud of you!"

Monsieur Henri is trembling with adoration and happiness. See the dear hands, behold the charming eyes which have seemed like a vision to him, and here are the tender lips which he had scarcely dared to look at in former times.

"Is it true that you love me, Louise?"

"Ah! Don't you think so, my sweetheart!"

"Do you remember, Louise, the time when

you asked me if I would throw myself for you from the top of the Eiffel Tower?"

"Henri, it is not necessary for you to remind me of my stupidity. I regret deeply that I misunderstood you. But how was I able to guess that you would be so brave, when I saw you fishing for gudgeons at Choisy?"

"Louise, I am no more brave than any of the others. We French have something in our blood that makes us fight well and that is all. After the war, if God keeps me alive, I shall become a book-clerk again and an angler as before. Perhaps then you will cease to love me."

"Henri, could I ever forget what you have been during this war, could I forget the heroism which I should never have known if Monsieur Robert had not told me about it?"

"Louise, when I thought I was fighting for France and for you, I would rather have been torn in pieces than retreat a step."

At these words Louise has a great desire to cry, but she does not want Monsieur Henri to see her tears; therefore she hides her face on the sublieutenant's shoulder. The tears run down and are absorbed in the dark-blue

coat. At this instant Monsieur Duval comes down from the apartment above and arrives, without any more noise than usual, opposite this unexpected sight—his daughter in the arms of an officer from the front! I should be telling a falsehood if I should say, as certain authors do, that he stops senseless with astonishment, as if lightning had struck at his feet. No; he recognizes his clerk at once and springs forward to press him to his heart in his turn.

"My dear Henri, how happy I should be if I were your father!"

"But you will be very soon, papa," says Louise.

They laugh over that with an air of mutual understanding, and Monsieur Duval asks:

"Well, how about the Boches?"

"We shall get them!" declares Monsieur Henri fearlessly.

XVI

PRECISELY the next day proves to be the kind of Sunday to drive the soldier on leave to Choisy-le-Roi to see the Bouchauds. Carping critics may say to me: "How can the police let him pass at the station if his ticket-of-leave is viséed for Paris?" I answer these cavilling spirits in this way: Monsieur Henri, thinking of everything, took care to obtain his leave for Paris-Choisy. Others may regret that the novelist, Xavier des Assernes, the editor of "Mirabelle of Pampeluna," and one of our most congenial characters, should not have been present at the general reunion of the Duval and Bouchaud families. Let these persons be reassured. Monsieur des Assernes arrived last evening from Toulouse. And if they are astonished at the singular coincidence which makes the novelist from Toulouse unexpectedly drop in at Paris each time a conspicuous event occurs either in the Bouchaud family, or in the Duval family, I could cite the best story-tellers who, from Voltaire to

Dumas, have used analogous circumstances in their novels. But I prefer to show you the bookseller, his family, as well as Sublieutenant Lecointre and the novelist des Assernes descending from the train at the Choisy station, where the Bouchaud ladies are waiting for them, waving their umbrellas. The department head and Adjutant Robert Picot, resplendent with health and happiness, are there, too. But who, then, is this young soldier in a new outfit, whose costume of sky-blue accentuates his fresh color, clear eyes, and blond hair? You would not have known him. It is Georges Bouchaud, and I will tell you at once why he is here.

Here is an entire family divided between a desire to fête the soldier on leave and anxiety to receive properly the celebrated man condescending to visit Choisy for the first time. While Monsieur Henri is falling into the arms of Monsieur Robert, Monsieur Bouchaud explains to des Assernes: "Monsieur, we are only middle-class people earning our living. I who am speaking to you am self-made, knowing nothing of literature, and it is a great honor you are paying us in coming to visit us. At

least you will find two French soldiers here of whom you will not be ashamed. We shall treat you as well as we are able, and we shall mingle your literary renown with our military glory."

"Monsieur," says des Assernes, astonished, "you are giving me, it seems to me, a reception almost academic."

"My goodness, monsieur," replies Father Bouchaud, "no one has ever whispered such a thing to me as you have just suggested. These are ideas I have thought of quite easily in the morning when I was smoking my pipe in the arbor."

"Old pal," says Monsieur Henri to Adjutant Picot, "the last time I saw you was in the trench in Lorraine; you were passing on a stretcher, with motionless head, sunken eyes, and your chest hidden by a large dressing. I certainly believed it was the end. I stationed myself behind a ruined wall so that my men should not notice that I was crying like a child."

"On the contrary, I was in luck!" cries Monsieur Robert, smiling.

And, pointing to Edith, he adds: "And, you

know, I don't regret the ball that penetrated my chest. It was worth a fortune to me."

"How Monsieur Henri has exaggerated," says good Madame Bouchaud.

"Do you remember, Monsieur Robert," asks Madame Duval, "do you remember when you caught a four-pound pike?"

Chatting away they reach the stone pavilion. The table is laid on the lawn before the front steps. The table-cloth is dazzling in the sun and the glass sparkles. With an intelligent look Monsieur Bouchaud assigns the champagne glasses to his brother-in-law.

"It is to drink the health of the lovers," he says.

They go to the table joyously and then look toward the younger member of the youthful military circle, Georges Bouchaud, who is somewhat impressed by the gold stripes of Sublieutenant Lecointre.

"What luck, that Georges was able to have his leave at this time," declares his cousin.

"But what has happened to his thumb?" questions Monsieur Duval, whose glance is piercing behind his eye-glass.

Then all eyes are levelled on Georges Bou-

chaud's thumb. The young soldier blushes, becomes scarlet, and shows his hand with a large scar extending from the first thumb joint to the life-line. They question him. They want to know about it.

"That," he says at last, "is the scar of a bayonet wound received in an assault. It was at the labyrinth, two months ago."

"You did not leave it?" asks his father.

"You must remember that they were advancing; I was not going to miss the end of it. . . ."

All forks are held suspended, all conversation stopped, and the ensuing silence lasts several seconds, while all eyes are turned with admiration toward the nineteen-year-old hero. They are just discovering Georges. They had not known him; he is revealing himself. Then his father turns toward des Assernes:

"There are no more children, monsieur. And do you know by what happy chance he is with us to-day, that big lad? Well, monsieur, it is because he is going to the Dardanelles in a week."

"He is going to fight the Turks!" cries Mademoiselle Louise.

"The crusades are beginning again!" adds the novelist.

"That will be fine," says Georges. "At first I shall go to see Marseilles; then there will be the voyage, and at last I shall learn to know a new country."

"The feelings of this soldier-child," remarks des Assernes, "do not differ from those of the knight of Catalpan returning to Barbary. The worthy desire to travel was joined to the passion for fighting for a great idea. It is true, we are not going for the purpose of making material conquests in Turkey, but to bring the modern Saracens back to reason, as they are leagued, quite naturally, with the barbarians against the civilization of Latin catholicism. The knights of the Middle Ages, like the Allies of to-day, defended refinement, humane manners, and the divine passion for liberty much more than they fought for certain leagues of territory. And what charms me most in this alliance is that in this new crusade, according to the splendid wish of Joan of Arc, we go hand in hand with the English."

"By the way," asks Sublieutenant Le-

cointre, "where are you then, monsieur, with your Mirabelle of Pampeluna?"

You may well imagine that des Assernes is only waiting for a word to speak of his dear Mirabelle, and now he starts off immediately on this subject:

"My dear friend, when I had the honor to accompany these charming young ladies to Lunéville we left Mirabelle in a Saracen château, where she found herself by a miracle in the place of her cavalier, the lord of Catalpan, who had been invisibly transported to Pampeluna. When the jailers, coming as usual to bring to the noble prisoner his meagre pittance of a little mouldy bread and a jug of bitter water, opened the iron shutter of the door they were greatly astonished to behold the beautiful young lady. They demanded of her how she came here. But because she had had no experience with the Saracens, Mirabelle did not explain anything to them. Meanwhile they saw the iron rings duly riveted to their pegs, and these heathen admired the workmanship and artifice of it all. Then they ran to the emir of Barbary to tell him of the adventure. The emir, who was very

old, did not disturb himself, having passed the curious age. But his son, hearing them speak of a Christian girl lying under the straw in one of the vast prisons, announced in his language that he was going to see himself how matters stood. He went. This young prince, although Saracen, was kind-hearted. When he saw this noble young lady of France bound by chains which made her delicate limbs black and blue, and fatigued them, he was moved with great pity and profound indignation, and commanded them to give her back her liberty. This, Mirabelle, as just as she was wise, refused. 'For,' said she, 'I lie in this place because of faith in God, in place of my knight, and I must be a captive as long as he would have been.' And the Saracen knight marvelled at so much good faith in a lady. 'Never have I seen so much uprightness,' he said. He had cheese fritters brought to her, some sweets, and brightly colored eggs. Then he went to find the sultan to arrange with him about the liberation of the lord of Catalpan, and when it was all understood he returned to tell Mirabelle that she was free. But it was a sad freedom, for the emir's son became

very melancholy whenever he thought of it. You have guessed it: he was very much in love. He gave her a sumptuous room with black slaves to serve her. And every day he came to tell her of his torment. The noble lady was thinking of other things than this little emir. She talked to him seriously to persuade him that she could not love any other knight than her own; how could she then think of an infidel? But she said these hard words with so much sweetness that the Saracen lord, instead of resigning himself, only loved her more.

"During this time the lord of Catalpan did not tarry in the castle of Pampeluna, from which the life had flown away. He had only one idea—to go and deliver Mirabelle. He ran straight to the castle of Foix, to obtain new arms and men-of-war. Here he is at Aigues-Mortes. He embarks with his little band after chartering a new ship with his money, and we see them again at the mercy of the waves and sailors."

Here, des Assernes, relating without fatigue, as he tastes one by one the duck with green peas, the traditional roast mutton, the Rus-

sian salad, and the ice-cream, starts at the sound of a double report. It is the two Bouchauds, father and son, making the champagne pop. He is obliged to stop a moment. The three soldiers raise their glasses to victory and the two fiancées wet their lips in the foam, each smiling at her lover. The air is mild, the sky clear, and the country serene. Charming interlude! Exquisite hour of respite! How far away the war is now! Our three warriors laugh heartily as they drink interminable toasts: their ears long to forget the noise of cannon, their eyes the sight of the war-harassed country at the front. Love agitates the women struggling not to think of the dangers hanging over these precious heads. They are granted this day to take breath. Is it not the way of the French to enjoy a dream as well as a reality? This is a day of dreams. Soon they serve the coffee and the liqueurs, and the cigarettes mingle their fragrant smoke with the perfume of the heliotrope beds.

XVII

IT is the close of the day. Twilight never comes without some melancholy. Under a leafy thicket of the green island where the launch had taken the guests, Henri and Louise are seated side by side, hand in hand. And do not think that they talk the rather stupid billings and cooings too often customary between lovers. The heroic times have made a deep impression on their souls. Tender caresses remain the same; meanwhile they do not degenerate into insipidity.

"Louise," says Monsieur Henri, "when Monsieur des Assernes describes to us the gracious and high-spirited Mirabelle, so wise, faithful, and brave, do you know whom I see?"

"No," replies the young girl, thus telling a falsehood.

"It is of you that I think, and it is you I picture, Louise, because you are as beautiful and as wise and as brave."

"Henri," she replies gravely, "I do not know whether I am as good as this beautiful lady; but I have often said that if you should be killed in this horrible war I should prefer to die in your place."

Alas! with this one word, the bird of ill omen they had driven away reappears. It hovers now over the two lovers as their faces grow sober.

"Don't say that," replies Monsieur Henri. "I should prefer to die twice. But, since you have brought up the idea of possible separation, Louise, it is necessary that I should tell you that the offensive is near and that there is a strong chance that I may not return. I am at present the head of the section. It is a fine post . . . a little dangerous."

Louise's eyes grow large and full of agony. They take in tenderly the entire person of the sublieutenant, so robust under his uniform. Great God! would it be possible to see this body bathed in blood and stretched out forever on the cold earth? She shudders without crying.

"Henri . . . but I do not want it! I do not wish you to die."

The officer replies, smiling sadly:

"Our happiness is a small thing, Louise, in comparison with the deliverance of the country. Certainly I am pierced with the thought of leaving you forever in this life. Nevertheless, I have made my sacrifice to France. We come to desire victory, that is to say the happiness of all, more than our own special humble good fortune. Would you love me as much, Louise, if I spoke otherwise?"

Louise has taken her face in her hands to hide the horrible emotion overwhelming her.

"You know well that I love you in the same way, Henri, and that I also have made my sacrifice. But there are moments when one shudders before the anguish.

She quickly wipes away the tears forming pearls in her eyes and at last smiles at her fiancé. The great trees protecting them are not surprised at this heroic dialogue. They have existed for centuries, these oaks and these poplars of the Ile de France, and it is perhaps not the first conversation they have heard of this kind. When this was a favorite residence of a king, more than one lord, leaving for Flanders or the Palatinate, said here

his impetuous farewells to his lady. And previously, in the glorious century of the conquests, how many soldiers torn from the arms of their sweethearts have spoken in the same way under the trees! And still farther in the past, who knows if a similar warrior has not used the same words here with the dear lassie he was leaving behind! History is only repetition, and France is always France.

XVIII

WE are in the trenches opposite the côte de Tahure on the evening of the 24th of September, 1915. In the captain's cave, with white chalk walls, lighted with a candle in a dark lantern, a majority of the officers of the 8th are reunited. Under the sacks of heaped-up earth protecting the roof they hear less distinctly, but in a more agonizing way, perhaps, the uninterrupted rolling of the thunder. Everything has rocked for two days, under the bombardment which is tearing up the enemy trenches. The captain asks, forcing his voice to make himself heard in the din:

"Have you seen the men?"

"They are perfectly calm and in good form, captain," says a lieutenant. "A short time ago they sang."

"Oh! To-night they are able to sing," says the captain.

Life at the front has changed lately. The blue helmet is seen, determining forever the characteristic appearance of the soldier of the

great war. We have also the white cave, with its helmeted shadows thrown by the candle on the chalky walls, and these men, seated on the straw mattress of their chief or on a plank, are doing what is quite unusual this evening. They are not especially sleepy while waiting for the formidable assault of the morrow. And the captain has taken from his canteen two bottles of old Medoc, a windfall hoarded for an important occasion.

"Captain," says Sublieutenant Picot gayly, "you are right to sacrifice your stores, for the future is doubtful for all of us who are here."

I have purposely said "Sublieutenant" Picot. It is not a mistake. The gold stripe was waiting for the adjutant on his return to the 8th, after his convalescence, passed at Choisy-le-Roi.

"It is all the same to us," says Lecointre, "if to-morrow should be the last day, we acknowledge that life has been good and its end beautiful, for before closing our eyes we shall have foreseen victory."

"And that is worth the cost, gentlemen," adds the captain. "To your health!"

"To the victory of to-morrow!" roar the seven men present, lifting their glasses.

"Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!" punctuate solemnly the large howitzers and the "75's," each time shaking the entire dugout cave and the men to their very inmost souls.

"I," says a little lieutenant, "shall be content to die after having seen that, for it must be fine!"

"It will be great sport!" cries the captain.

"Gentlemen," says Lecointre, lifting his glass for the second time, "I propose to drink to those whom we may not see again and to whom heavy misfortune is coming. . . ."

"To the women of France!" flings out joyously the little lieutenant.

Arms are raised again, waving the glasses. But this time the glasses tremble slightly. It is perhaps because the bombardment is redoubled and the ground is shaken.

"To my fiancée!" announces Picot faithfully.

The gay little lieutenant says:

"To my mother!"

Then the captain, his eyes determinedly fixed on the candle of the lantern:

"I have three little children. . . ."

In leaving their shelter, a quarter of an hour later, to regain their sections, Picot and

Lecointre plunge into the darkness of the opaque night, where they are obliged to feel their way by seeking with their hands the rough places in the wall of the trench. Their feet stumble about the ground through the mire, for a fine rain has begun to fall this afternoon. The thunder has become unbearable. The strained ear-drums feel as if they were bursting.

"Listen!" says Picot suddenly.

"No need of listening, old pal," roars Lecointre, "I hear enough."

"But no, you do not understand me! I am speaking of the noise between the reports of the cannon."

At this moment a French fusee, like a bright Roman candle, shoots off at the right, making a dazzling and fugitive day. The entire devastated plain can be seen. The trenches are marked by large hummocks of earth. Hundreds of thousands of men are underneath, crouching, immovable, listening. But as everything is enveloped in thick night again, a murmur seems to come from the immense ant-hill. It is heard, when by the action of the artillery, several seconds pass between the

fires of the battery. Their features are drawn with disquietude. Is it by chance a wave of discontent running through the invisible mass in the shadow? Is it that at the approach of the formidable assault an instinctive and brutish protest rises from these French breasts? Lecointre and Picot are shocked at this suspicion. However, at regular intervals, quickly smothered by the thunder of the artillery, the uproar is heard. The two officers listen more attentively. The subterranean army watching there is composed of all the people of France. They are come from Brittany and the coasts of Provence, from Lorraine and Anjou; invaded Artois and Flanders have furnished some, as well as Auvergne and Savoy; Norman lads are crowded with Parisians and the Vendéens with the Gascons. And now as the clamor grows more distinct they recognize words. Between the frightful detonations of the large pieces and the sharper ones of the "75's" the men shout at the top of their lungs:

"Susette, Susette,
Il ne faut pas croire à l'amour!"

XIX

THREE days later, installed in a German officer's shelter passed over by the bombardment, Robert Picot, after having copiously disinfected with the smoke of many pipes and cigars, writes to Edith:

"My dearest, here I am again about and very much alive, after having known during the days of Saturday and Sunday, with the excitement of the assaults, the intoxication of victory. When this letter reaches you, the papers will have told you in detail the whole history of this Champagne offensive. We have gained much ground and somewhat weakened our enemies. Later, when the history of this war is written in its entirety, the value of our effort will be determined, even if we did not attain the definite object that we hoped for. To-day, my beloved, I want to tell you, so that you may report to Mademoiselle Louise, who will be proud of it, the heroic conduct of my brave friend, Lecointre.

"At a quarter of nine on Saturday morning

the rain deluging Champagne we leaped over in the parapet. Lecointre commanded the section next to mine. In these moments one pays little attention to his neighbor. He has only one idea. He asks if each man is doing his duty and that is all. From the parapet we rushed out to the plain. The fire of the machine-guns had begun to hit us. It was ten minutes after our mass of men jumped on the ground that I felt a giving way on my right. Several fusees burst in the air, and their fragments made a hole in the human quadrilateral, rending it apart like a herd of cattle struck by lightning. After which a torpedo fell between our two squares. My dearest, what a cataclysm! What a Day of Judgment! One might have said that a crater had just opened and a jet of black smoke, obscuring everything, rose in a sooty column. I shall never forget what I saw then, Edith. A man thrown to the earth by the explosion suddenly rose, black with powder and with soot, brandishing his hunting-knife. I did not recognize him, but at his voice I trembled; it was Lecointre. He roared in the infernal din: 'Close up your ranks! Close up your ranks!'

And he wheeled around his section like a shepherd-dog around his sheep. One did not hear the whistle of the balls until they grazed him, but it was a hail-storm of bullets. He was not hit. He had reformed his section, which entered with mine into the German trench. All that only lasted two minutes. My dear Edith, Lecointre is a hero and I wish I were like him."

And while the former gloveseller peacefully writes these lines on the table of the vanquished enemy, Sublieutenant Lecointre, before going to verify the number of mattocks and shears of his section, wrote in haste to his dear Louise:

"My dearest, I am safe and sound. Alas! I wish I could say as much of my poor comrades! It costs dear to redeem French soil from the Boches! I have seen my young friend fall near me, a lieutenant twenty-three years old who was gayety itself, and our captain has received the severest wounds. God be thanked Picot is uninjured. And, my dear Louise, you must tell your cousin about it; his bravery has been above all praise. His modesty will make him keep silence, no doubt. I

have seen him, under the barrage fire, leading his section toward the trenches of the second line and penetrating the first, knife in hand. In these moments, my dearest Louise, we become a little savage as the yells of the men mingle with the uninterrupted rumbling of thunder, and one thinks no more of being afraid for his life. But I truly think that I should not have had the disconcerting aplomb of our brave Picot, charging right toward the Boches, who surrendered at the mere sight of him, while farther away these men threw hand-grenades to vanquish the last resistance of the menacing enemies. Yes, my dear Louise, tell Mademoiselle Edith that she may be proud of him."

Qu'un ami véritable est une douce chose!

XX

"THREE days after the Purification of Our Lady, on the eve of Saint Dorothea, the count Mainfroy of Catalpan and his attendants landed near the country of Barbary, on the border of the sea, and they disembarked in the night so that the Saracens might not see them. Then Mainfroy sent spies to discover the place of the Christian camp where he was advised to go, before delivering his lady. The lord of Catalpan and his retainers rode on horses many days and many nights. At the break of day they rode quietly, and the same by the light of the stars, enduring at each turn the assaults of the Saracens. And the count and his followers thus killed many infidels. The Monday before Ash Wednesday the little troop arrived in the Christian camp near a river. And the knight knew from a distance that it was the Christian camp, so they made great haste to reach it, singing sweet songs of France. Then the count of Foix saw his nephew and began to

weep, as he had thought he was enchained in a deep prison. The young lord embraced him and told him the miracle by which he was saved. When he heard it, the count of Foix loudly praised God and His Mother. 'Alas!' replied the young lord, 'I am not able to rejoice over my liberty because my lady, Mirabelle of Pampeluna, has taken my place in a castle of Barbary.' 'My nephew,' replied the count, 'eagerness to deliver your lady is a noble desire; but a better plan is to fight for the king of France, who is planning in this place a great enterprise and must not be left in such peril and danger.' 'By the head of God!' cries Mainfroy, 'I shall fight first before going to save my lady.' 'Well said!' cries the count of Foix. And again he hands his banner to his nephew.

"It was Shrove Tuesday when the Christian army crossed the river by a ford. And the stallion carrying Count Mainfroy was drowned because he tried to climb too steep a river bank. It was a wonder to see all this company cross these waters. Soon the Saracen camp, which was built there, was agitated and its mangonels began to throw many stones

and the archers many arrows. So the Christian knight always advanced and marched toward a beautiful town of Barbary, whose square towers and flat roofs they saw at a distance. The Knights Templars from Cyprus went with their spears to the help of Mainfroy and from the other bank of the river threw fiery weapons, burning the Saracen machines. And when they were all burned to ashes, they did not throw any more limestone or rocks. Then the Christians went on without obstacle and arrived before the town. When, banner in hand, the lord of Catalpan saw the high walls of the ramparts from which the torrents of boiling oil had poured down, he was inflamed by the greatest desire of conquest he had ever known. And he cried loudly, raising his banner: 'At them! At them!' Then as they swerved he saw what he could never forget, namely, on a great highway leading to the entrance of the town, a great lord riding on a horse draped with cloth of gold. This lord was surrounded by so many other knights that they filled the roads and the country from the river to this place. And the great lord, with the noble face, had overcome everything. And because divine majesty mingled with the

sweetness of his features, Mainfroy knew that it was the king of France. 'By Saint Denis,' he thought, 'if I never see my lady again I shall send my troop under the oil and the stones to conquer this town for my lord. Then stones were hurled to break down the doors; and as water pours into the hole in a ship, Mainfroy's archers entered through the openings and massacred the infidels. Then a Saracen engine, hurling stones and rocks, threw at the forehead of the good knight such a large paving-stone that he fell down as if dead. In great fear and misery the count of Foix ran to help his nephew, but drew back with horror on perceiving the suffering of that brave face, which was no longer more than a gaping hole pouring out blood and from which the eyes were gone. So the prayer of the brave knight was granted that he should not see his lady again until the city should be taken, for it fell into the hands of the king of France, and Mainfroy lived, tended by the Knights Templars, but he would never see either the light of day nor the lady who was more to him than the light, that is to say the lovely Mirabelle."

Thus read des Assernes, one evening in

March, 1916, in the private end of the bookshop, Rue du Cherche-Midi. At this point in his reading a client wanting a novel and calling Monsieur Duval away from the absorbed audience causes an interruption and gives Mademoiselle Louise a chance to ask him:

"But did this poor Mainfroy remain blind all of his life?"

"Alas! yes, mademoiselle," replies des Assernes, with sincere sadness; have you not perfectly understood that he lost not only his sight but his eyes, which was irreparable?"

"He must have been very much disfigured!" says Madame Duval.

"Madame," continues des Assernes, "one is not beautiful, indeed, when one loses the ornament and the light of the countenance, and when in its place there are two gaping holes. But my troubadour is very discreet about it. The flower of good French taste in literature had already bloomed. Rude as he may have been, the writer of the Middle Ages knew always how to stop on the edge of horror and disgust. The lord of Catalpan was assuredly not in a pleasant predicament. But the beauty of this leonine knight must always re-

main for us independently of his features. Although his face is disfigured, he remains, nevertheless, an ideal and charming person. Our admiration for him and our respect cause us to draw a veil over his terrible scars."

"I should like to know," asks Mademoiselle Louise, impatient, "if Mirabelle was delivered, if she saw her knight again, and what she felt when she no longer found in him anything but an object of horror."

"Mademoiselle," replies des Assernes, "you approach here the most delicate, moving, dramatic, and charming passage of this beautiful story. Unhappily I have not had up to the present the time to make a fair copy of it. Nevertheless, here is a résumé of what happened. . . ."

With this they settle themselves more comfortably in the private part of the shop. Monsieur Duval, having seen his customer out, comes back to take his place again, and des Assernes, seeing that every one is hanging on his words, continues:

"When the town was conquered and our hero recovered, the count of Foix said to his nephew that it was now right for him to go to

save his lady. Behold, the blind knight intrusted with a mission singular enough in his condition. You will all exclaim at the impossibility. But it was not an enterprise too reckless for a lord of the character of Mainfroy. He had a horse, his lance, and his shield brought to him, and climbed into the saddle. As he had a faithful esquire, he charged him to lead the stallion by the bridle. One hundred men at arms followed them, and they had a spy for a guide. Meanwhile Mirabelle of Pampeluna was pining away, and almost dying, in her room ornamented with silver crescents. One day she heard a loud noise in front of the castle; she went to the loopholes and saw the crusaders. You may imagine whether her heart beat, for in the proud bearing of the chief of the troop she had no hesitation in recognizing her knight. I think that you do not doubt a single minute whether the knight of Catalpan, blind as he was, was still invincible. To conquer the Saracen castle was for him the work of an instant. And then he searches from room to room for the lady of his thoughts, while the black slaves fled, uttering piercing cries. But when he arrived at

Mirabelle's room and the sound of his name spoken by the sweet lips of the lady froze him to the very marrow, the knight remained on the threshold as if insensible. There were several truly tragic seconds. The poor lord, feeling that he had lost all attractiveness, did not dare to advance; the lady was as overwhelmed by what she found in the face that had recently so charmed her. I think that in her place I should have hidden in a corner heaving sighs of horror. For, indeed, in love. . . ."

"Monsieur des Assernes," reproves Mademoiselle Louise, "you are not a woman really in love. You are only a romance writer. Otherwise, you would not split so many hairs over this scene which should move along with great simplicity. Did your troubadour give so many words to it?"

"Heavens," replies Monsieur des Assernes, a little embarrassed, "I acknowledge that, in the text, the plot is unravelled in two lines: 'Dear love, I have found you again!' cried Mirabelle; to which Mainfroy responded: 'Lady, turn your lovely eyes away from me, for a more hideous thing has come to me than

leprosy.' Then the lady went to him and kissed him on the forehead."

"You see, Monsieur des Assernes," says Louise reprovingly, "that Mirabelle did not stand on ceremony. As for me, I have thought several times that Henri might return mutilated. Do not fear in the least that in that case I should be obliged to force myself not to flee like a silly fool. No, no, too happy if he should return, even if he lacked an arm, an eye, or a leg."

Des Assernes, moved, murmurs:

"I am only half surprised at you, mademoiselle, for women are angels."

"My dear master, you speak like an old bachelor," continues Monsieur Duval.

XXI

ON Sunday, in winter, the family Bouchaud came to spend the day with the Duvals instead of receiving them at Choisy-le-Roi.

Now, at the end of the day, behind the closed blinds of the shop front, the two young women offer tea to des Assernes and to the two reunited families in the lighted shop. You will no doubt ask who is the robust, helmeted soldier devouring tarts and little cakes, handed to him by the young ladies. I was sure you would not recognize him, because he has greatly changed. Well, it is Georges Bouchaud. He is twenty years old now, and he has seen so many things! The south of France, Marseilles, and the sea. His torpedoed steamer was wrecked and he was picked up by an Italian trawler. He has experienced camps in the sand under a torrid sun, the European castle, and the Asiatic castle, trenches in front of the Turks and terrible

assaults against modern Saracens. He has seen the minarets of Constantinople soaring in his dreams, as of old the crusaders saw Jerusalem; he returned, a deck passenger, looking over the sea on the surface of the water for the periscopes of Boche submarines. Then they sent him back to Artois to be with the English. He has spent the rainy and cold months in the trenches,which are deep streams where one's legs splash along, eating and sleeping at the bottom of mud holes. Then suddenly, in February, there was the transfer by auto to Verdun and the desperate defense. Now, he is come from Fort Vaux for seven days' leave. You must not be astonished if this gamin has acquired some maturity.

"Tell Monsieur des Assernes what it is like at Verdun," directs his mother naïvely.

"Bah!" replies the little warrior, recently returned from his nightmare, "those are things that one is not able to imagine. It is necessary to have been there."

"That is what they all say, monsieur," remarks Father Bouchaud, "it is necessary to have been there."

"Poor children!" sighs Monsieur Duval.

"Henri is at Hill No. 304," says Louise.

"Robert, too," says Edith.

"What do you suppose is happening at this moment, what are they doing while we are here taking tea so tranquilly?" asks Louise quite dreamily of herself.

"The fact is," replies des Assernes, "that in this quiet circle, domestic and intimate, we have no doubt at all that fifty or sixty leagues from us there is carnage and horror. Here we live, there they are dying. And meanwhile, my dear Duval, if we seek for the reason of the sacrifice of our most brilliant intellects and of many of our fallen geniuses on the field of honor, we see that at the end of the reckoning this rare and precious blood was only spilled to safeguard perfectly these walls of old books; I might say that they represent, so to speak, the form and the substance of the French spirit. War is the most profound of human mysteries."

"Would you like some more sandwiches?" asks Louise of the young cousin. "What an appetite! There, my boy, and there again!"

The two young girls surround Georges,

laughing. Monsieur Bouchaud says to des Assernes in a low voice:

"Monsieur, I am delighted to hear you speak in this way, you who have a superior mind. But, for myself, I cannot comprehend why this rascal, made, as you see, with the arms and legs of a giant, should return tomorrow down there with the 420th and be crushed as I crush a fly. Such an idea, monsieur, cannot enter the mind of a father."

"Monsieur," replies des Assernes, "it is not necessary to try to expatiate on the war. It is enough for us to understand the task it imposes upon us. The soldiers defending Verdun at this moment are not philosophers. If your son should think of deserting . . ."

"Oh, monsieur!" says Father Bouchaud.

"I was relying on you there, monsieur," says des Assernes. "The feeling of national honor has affected you so that you have become suspicious. You would not protect your son in the least if it dishonored him. You would sooner consent to his death. This is the fact: it is your feeling and that of thousands of soldiers who secure by their sacrifice

the conservation of an ideal which we adore without understanding it. It was the same with the crusaders who went across the sea for France. They obeyed their heroic instinct telling them to die to safeguard noble sentiments. We have been heirs for centuries of all that they fought for. Except for the crusades, monsieur, all the beautiful books you see ranged on the shelves would not have existed, and perhaps in your store, the *Meilleur Marché*, one could not have purchased such marvels of taste to-day and the finest fashions, for it is all one nation; yesterday and to-day are all one. That is why your little soldier on leave whom I see feasting on cakes to-day, and taking life so boyishly, will go to-morrow courageously to the Eastern Station to return to the loophole where he mounts guard day and night against the enemies of the noble works his uncle sells here. And if he did not go, monsieur, you would be the first to be grieved."

"Evidently, monsieur; and I ask myself how I can understand myself in the confusion of such contradictory feelings."

"Monsieur," replies des Assernes, "Mira-

belle of Pampeluna, my heroine of the Middle Ages, was no less divided than you between her love and her patriotism. This contradiction is not new, as you see."

"My dear master," says Monsieur Duval, "à propos of Mirabelle of Pampeluna, have you been able to decipher the end of that beautiful story?"

Des Assernes, smiling as he thinks of his story, proceeds:

"I have not resisted the desire that you suggest in the least, my dear Duval. Before I had read the substance of the manuscript, I tried to find the smallest leaf of the scattered parchment. It is full of magnificence and describes the marriage of the noble lady with Count Mainfroy of Catalpan, which took place at Saint-Jean-d'Acre, where Mirabelle had been taken to a place of safety, I think, with the queen of France. It describes the costumes of the ladies, the presents of the young bride, details glistening like cathedral windows. The silk, gold, ermine, jewels, pearls, embroideries, inlays, iridescent trinkets and works of art, pearly and embossed, all sparkled and shone, and I remember also the ele-

phant of painted glass, a gift from the sultan of Egypt. But what you must see in the midst of this fairy scene is the poetic appearance of Mirabelle on the arm of the blind and disfigured knight. They have reached the fulfilment of their vows, having surmounted many vicissitudes, and they exchange an amorous duet which after six hundred years still vibrates in our ears like fresh and delicious music. I have thought of you, ladies, in deciphering these Gothic and illegible characters; I foresaw what would be your felicity, you who are modern Mirabelles of Pampeluna, the day when the two heroes you love come to bring you back victory and love."

"If they ever return!" says Edith, wiping away a furtive tear.

"Ah! if I could only know what is happening there at this moment!" says Louise.

XXII

BUT at the moment when Louise speaks thus, this is what is happening at Hill 304, which Monsieur Henri, chief of the section in the 8th, has held for three days in a first-line trench.

The fading twilight bathes in a gray atmosphere the fair and lovely country of the Meuse. The green hill crowned with thick woods curves in soft lines; it descends on the right side into a contracted valley through which the Béthincourt River flows, and climbs again in a new elevation. And the other hill stripped bare is the *Mort-Homme*. Sometimes, if the eye is able to penetrate into ravines made by the same hills and valleys, white cliffs may be seen in the misty distance and the clear waters of the Meuse flowing at their feet. Opposite is the black mass of the Corbeaux wood, already plunged in darkness.

And in the calm Elysium of this peaceful scene the formidable cataclysm of an artillery battle is let loose.

The trench, where Sublieutenant Lecointre's section has taken shelter, was dug with difficulty in the chalk of the north side. But, shooting from the Corbeaux wood, the enemies have nibbled little by little the foot of the hill, and on a platform which breaks the slope at one point, they, too, are clinging to another trench, opposite the French. And while the two companies of infantry lie in wait for each other, challenge and expect each other, the great shells rain ceaselessly down, levelling the declivity, filling up the trenches, annihilating the shelters, machine-guns, muskets, soldiers, and petty officers.

Below, to the southeast, Verdun, the invisible fortress, sleeps. It has become sacred less through its rôle than by the blood of those who have died in its defense.

Sublieutenant Lecointre is seated in a recess in his shelter and, with his elbows on his knees, tries to dream a minute. But it is impossible. He cannot even bring back the vision of Louise. It wavers and is obliterated. Besides, everything is about to end. Death is there in possession of him, of his friends and of his men. A bursting shell on the parapet

has just entombed three soldiers of his section near by; they are working to extricate their corpses, hoping in vain that life has not left them altogether. The next time it will be his turn. Life is pouring out for him the last bitter drops of the cup. A little earlier, a little later! One cannot even imagine the horror of this minute.

In seeing Monsieur Henri despondent in this way, you think perhaps with some regret: "Here is a shattered hero who has lost his heroism." Do not deceive yourself. It is as noble for Monsieur Henri and for thousands of men crouched with him in this section of hell to cling thus immovable, under shell-fire during six consecutive days and nights, as to rush en masse in the open field to brilliant warfare. If all these men were not warriors of the first rank they would long ago have marched past, huddled together, to Chattancourt, by the steepest slopes of the western hilltop. But no, they stick to their untenable trenches, because the honor of France requires that they should die rather than yield. Nothing can dislodge them. Only, at the end of sixty or eighty hours, they no longer care to

laugh; the imperishable sense of honor alone sustains the worn-out creature.

The little white houses that you see at the bottom of the valley, between the poplars trembling on the border of the river of Béthincourt, form the village of Esnes. They climb up on the slopes of Hill 304 on this side and cling also on the other side to the slopes of the *Mort-Homme*. It is there that the third company, with Monsieur Robert, is supporting the first line.

From the house where Monsieur Robert is billeted, at the end of the valley, through the windows, now without panes, the entire sector may be seen. This house is an old mill overhanging the little river of Béthincourt. The water-gates, and the site of the wheel, are still to be found. The clear water runs between the stones. There must be trout under the green poplars. But Monsieur Robert does not think of watching their dark passage in the transparent water. His eyes are lifted to the hill of *Mort-Homme*, rising on the right. For, on the hillside where the sparse growth of vegetation barely conceals the chalky subsoil, little black ants are climbing slowly. And

there they separate in two horizontal bands, coming out of their ant-hill, and from place to place the movement increases and multiplies. Soon the entire hill is covered. From time to time one sees in the air above the poor little climbing ants the bursting of a formidable bomb, and afterward its ball of smoke, green and sulphurous, floats for a long time like a light balloon; then they crouch on the ground; one can no longer distinguish the black streaks of their lines. Later they rise and begin to run again in bare spaces on the mountain.

And Monsieur Robert trembles, for he knows that these black ants, so small, so tiny, on the high hill, are his comrades leaving for the assault on the enemy trenches.

And the movement increases; by half sections the troops come from here, there, and everywhere; they descend the slope of *Mort-Homme* and remount Hill 304. Monsieur Robert knows that his regiment will take part in its turn. The regiment is a thing secretly dear. Civilians hardly understand what a number may mean on a man's collar. Monsieur Robert is moved with profound anguish. But it is time to rejoin his section. In the

kitchen where his captain remains at the telephone he receives an order to gather his men together behind the church. He himself proceeds to a barn with a battered-in roof, where it is already night. The men are on the straw, where one can vaguely perceive their blue coats moving.

"Get up, boys!" says the sublieutenant; "our comrades are about to go over the barbed wire. We must be equipped to aid them."

Many of the men are sleeping; one sees them stretching their weary limbs, yawning. Picot begins again:

"Boys, we are here to help our comrades. They are in a dangerous position. It would not be right for them to be killed without us."

In silence the men fasten their knapsack straps and put them over their chests in the darkness. Not a word is heard. As he grows accustomed to the darkness Picot now sees the bearded men and the beardless boys of class '15. His heart is touched by so much resignation in their fearlessness.

He murmurs on leaving them:

"Boys, we will get them."

Night comes when they are assembled be-

hind the church. There are seven or eight companies of various regiments. The men speak low. No trumpets, no drums. They march, by sections, to cut across the right side of Hill 304. They are, in their turn, little creeping ants. But here the thicket, although cut down in many gaps, still hides the men. Then they arrive at the trenches. Soon the non-commissioned officers have the grenades passed along. One knows that the grenades mean that there will be an immediate assault. A clatter of arms is heard through the crowded trenches. "Fix bayonets!" Still the slow moments are punctuated by claps of thunder and the noise of continuous explosions. At the head of the trench occupied by Robert Picot, one is constantly disturbed by the passage of the stretcher-bearers carrying wounded men on litters, still covered with blood, with unrecognizable dangling heads, black with the smoke of the fusillade. Suddenly there is the signal of the whistle, short and shrill, that they are waiting for. With grenades in their pockets, a gun in the right hand, the left hand free to enable them to jump, the sections leap over the parapet. The first German trench having

been taken, the question is how to aid their comrades to hold their ground. The waves of bluecoats bound along. It is a veritable flood rolling in. And the shells continue to make holes in the rushing surge, and the line of stretcher-bearers continues to carry the human wrecks toward the post of safety hidden in a grove of Hill 304.

Picot, sensitive and nervous, in the fascination of this exciting and intoxicating assault, sees a wounded man pass and turn his head. He shivers with horror, for the unknown man whose regiment and grade he is unable to distinguish, has no face left. The ball destroying his two eyes seems, as a result of coagulated blood, to have removed all of his features. "Why have the stretcher-bearers taken up this unfortunate man?" asks Picot of himself. And he continues his way to carry out the mission of his section, without knowing that the living corpse he has just passed is Lecointre.

XXIII

"DO you suffer much?" asks the young assistant doctor, leaning over Monsieur Henri's stretcher.

The other stretchers lie in a straight line in a large trench at the door of a safety post dug quite deep in the earth.

"I do not suffer enormously," replies Monsieur Henri, "but the blood makes me blind and I do not see, I cannot see you."

The doctor says:

"I am the doctor. What is your name?"

"Sublieutenant Lecointre. You don't recognize me then, old fellow?"

"Ah, pardon," says the doctor, moved. "It is so badly lighted here."

Water now trickles down over the half-destroyed face. Thick cotton and dressings fill the bloody cavities. Twice the wounded man feels the needle of a syringe piercing his flesh for an antitetanus inoculation, and then for an inoculation of serum, for he has lost rivers of blood and his heart grows weak.

In this mouldy cave the attendants come and go, dressing the wounds of the injured and assisting the doctor. Monsieur Henri asks in the tone of distress of a wounded man in danger of fainting:

"Are my eyes not involved then?"

The attendants look at each other and they glance at the doctor, who responds sadly:

"But no, my dear man, we shall save your eyes quite easily."

In a corner the chaplain on his knees confesses a dying man and embraces him before he breathes his last sigh. At a sign, two stretcher-bearers run, lifting the sublieutenant's litter and carrying it away to make place for others. Then the inert body is balanced again through the winding trenches by four tired arms. After that Monsieur Henri, in a feverish coma, feels himself carried in an auto, jolting desperately over a road full of shell-holes, which must be traversed at full speed, for the Boche cannon ferret out the motor ambulances on the way. At last there is a little bed in a smooth and comfortable train. Then the arrival in a hospital.

"Lift this bandage, first of all," he begs,

"so that I may see something at last! This darkness stifles me!"

A soft hand takes his, and a woman's voice replies:

"You must still have a little patience, my dear wounded man; when you are well rested we shall rid you of them."

"Where am I?" asks Monsieur Henri.

"In Paris, at the Rue Cambon hospital."

"In Paris!" says the sublieutenant, smiling like a child. "In Paris? But then . . .?"

You can guess the rest.

XXIV

MONSIEUR HENRI has waited twenty-four hours for Louise. He is a little nervous. Each time that the door of his room opens he is obliged to make an effort not to tear away the blinding bandage. At times he feels like crying, for he is very weak, and he also feels a little childish vexation with his attendant. She is no doubt very good, this nurse; since yesterday he feels himself pampered by her like an old patient in whom she is especially interested. She continually comes in to inform herself about his condition and asks what he wants. See, here she is again. But no, there are a few steps, a rustle of skirts. Monsieur Henri instinctively raises himself. Two arms are thrown around his neck. He murmurs: "Louise!"

I do not need to tell you that the first kiss lasts a long time. Then Madame Duval stammers, quite upset: "The good weather is here; when you are quite well, Monsieur Henri,

you will go once more to fish for pike at Choisy-le-Roi."

But Monsieur Henri sighs: "Louise, how I long to see you! How hard it is not to be able to look at you."

Whereupon, God be thanked, Monsieur Henri is not able to see that both of them are crying. Alas! they have been warned; they know well that it is all over, that the poor eyes no longer exist, that he will never see Louise again. The dear hands press his own. Louise says:

"What difference does that make, since I am here near you?"

"Louise, I long to see you!"

And she feels the hand of the wounded man searching for the features of her face. . . .

On the way back Madame Duval says simply to her daughter: "It is very sad, my poor child, to think that you are to marry a blind man."

"What do you want, mamma?" says Louise. "He might not have returned at all, and I have feared it day and night. Now he has come, I am too happy to be sorry for myself. Besides we shall love each other more

now, for I shall bring light to him, and do not wish him to hear of his blindness from any one but me, for I shall tell him so tenderly that he will not think about his suffering."

XXV

THE following Sunday the Bouchaud and Duval families are reunited around the bed of Monsieur Henri, in the room where a gracious and sweet nurse appears from time to time.

". . . And you know," declares Monsieur Henri, "they will never take Verdun."

"Georges is down there, too," says Monsieur Bouchaud. "He is at Fort Vaux, the poor lad!"

"Louise," asks Monsieur Henri, "would you be willing to read yesterday's official news to me?"

And while Louise reads aloud the announcement of the furious cannonade resounding on both banks of the Meuse and the counter-attacks to the north of Vaux and of Hill 304, Monsieur Henri, listening with all his ears, in spite of the thick bandage hiding more than half of his face, appears anxious and troubled. Verdun! And he sees it again in his heart.

"Robert is hunting for you through his entire section," says Mademoiselle Edith. "He wrote me a desperate letter this morning; his comrades have assured him that they saw you fall, mortally wounded. I reassured him as quickly as possible."

"It is a curious thing," says M. Bouchaud then, who loves to find the reason and cause of everything, "that the French have turned their eyes for weeks toward a menaced fortress and then are told that it is dismantled and has no longer any importance. One no longer sees anything but Verdun. At the glove counter the women talk about it. An American said to me yesterday: 'Oh! it would make me furious if the Germans should take Verdun.' I responded: 'Madame, my son is fighting there.' She replied as she rose: 'Oh! I am delighted to salute the father of a great hero. I love the soldiers of Verdun.' This is what the neutrals think of you, Monsieur Henri."

"And Monsieur des Assernes and Mirabelle of Pampeluna, what has become of them?" inquires the wounded man.

"The romance of Mirabelle is ended," re-

plies Louise, in a somewhat trembling voice. "The lord of Catalpan had his eyes torn out when a Saracen town was taken. But he was able, nevertheless, to deliver Mirabelle, and he married her in the middle of a beautiful court."

"Did she marry a blind man?" asks Monsieur Henri, in a peculiar voice.

"Yes. Do you find that extraordinary, my dear Henri?"

"It is certainly devotion," says the officer.

"It is certainly happiness," says Louise.

"You think so?"

"Of course. They would be so united. She would become indispensable to him. He would see through her eyes; he could not walk without giving her his hand. She would feel that she is his whole life. He would know that she no longer exists, that she could not exist except for him. What a union, what intimacy, what sweetness!"

A profound silence reigns in the room where each heart is bursting with emotion. Suddenly a sigh rends the breast of the wounded man.

"I understand," he says. "I am blind."

His hands feel for Louise's and clasp them convulsively.

"Are you afraid of life?" asks his fiancée.

"No," says the wounded man. "I am happy."

XXVI

WE are at the dessert of a magnificent wedding-feast, and have arrived at the ice-cream, in the dining-room of the Rue du Cherche-Midi.

"Of course," says Monsieur Duval, "we should have been more elegant at a hotel, but for a war marriage, without any ceremony, it is better at home."

Indeed, they have only invited Robert Picot and Monsieur des Assernes. Unhappily, there is one empty place, that of the gallant little Georges, the defender of the Fort Vaux, who is now, with his heroic commander, a prisoner in Germany. But his glory hovers over them here; his misfortune and his courage unite to make the thought of him poetic. All of his life people will say to his family, "Georges was at Vaux." Monsieur Bouchaud realizes it perfectly.

"The poor lad," he sighs, "he is so fond of ice-cream! The cursed Boches would never

let him have a taste of it, we understand that! Anyway, we are not ashamed of him, are we, mamma?"

"Certainly not," says the mother, "but they should give permission to soldiers to return to see their families. That would help them to be patient."

"The French do it finely," says Monsieur Bouchaud, "the Boches never."

The bride bends continuously toward her dear wounded man, whom she watches as if he were a little child, guiding his hand toward the plate, cutting his cakes and peeling his fruit.

Robert Picot, who has received the Legion of Honor, murmurs in Edith's ear:

"I should like to lose my sight, too."

"I cannot wish for it," says Edith heroically, "for France has need of you to the very end. But even without that, dear Robert . . ."

Over the champagne, des Assernes, who has been silent for a moment, rises and says, with his wine-glass in his hand:

"Where am I? Is it the twentieth century, is it the thirteenth? Am I assisting at the

wedding of Mirabelle of Pampeluna, or at one of a Parisian of the present day? Can the hero I see here so admired by us be the book-clerk, as modest as he is learned, who recently searched through the octavos with me, or, indeed, the crusading knight, blinded before Mansourah by the blow of a Saracen stone? And this other hero attending him, does he come from Damietta or from Verdun? To-day, as yesterday, I find again among the women the same nobility, the same bravery, and the same idea of honor. Among the men unconquerable courage and sacrifice for the glory of the country. What harmony between the centuries! In spite of vicissitudes, evolutions, and transformations, France is one and always like herself. What she was seven hundred years ago, under the white robe of chivalry, so I find her again to-day, her expression graver, a little sobered by the meditations of science, filled with the smoke of industry, railroads, and steamboats, but graced with the same passion, with the same youth and charm which fascinates the world and disconcerts even her barbaric enemies. I lift my glass to the France of Mirabelle and to the

France of Edith Bouchaud and of Louise Lecointre!"

And each one raises his glass to immortal France!

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